Happy Families Kill People Too

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Collections:	Tim Drake Is Deranged (affectionate), My Entire History, Library, tim drake fics I will hoard in my brain for all eternity, cauldronrings favs (•̀ω•́)✧, S.T.I.L.L., ✨fics that keep me up at night✨, The Witch's Woods, uzen: i like this a Normal amount, Evidence of My Time Consuming Side Hobby, Salmonight's Shifter AU, Anodyne fics, Absolutely Needed For My Continued Existence, Yes. Just Yes, A collection of works with quality 😌💅✨, They can be a little unhinged as a treat, fics that pop into my head at 3am and won't let me rest until i reread them, Leymonaide fic recs, Rain Recs, Chef's kiss all the way, the sleep deprivation was worth it, Delicious Trickery and Mayhem, pockets full of spaghetti, *smacks lips* good soup, Still Ongoing (But hella fantastic!!), Magnolia's Favourite Fics, Crack favourites, Fics that manage my depression, <33, Coming Up Aces, DevilishDC, just some incredible batman ff, I don't wanna look at anything else now that I saw you, Fvcking LOVE

These Fics, Moon's Beloved Tim Drake & Jason Todd Works, Made Me Get Out Of My Seat, Tim Drake Is A Dragon, Hilarious my goodness, Seya's beloved rereads, Love these, The Queen's Picks, The Library of Joy, the peanut butter to my jelly, High Quality Fics that I would die for (^^), And I will hold these in my heart forever, Batfam Shenanigans, Perfect Rereads, LoyaltySeries, All-Time Favs, Janet Drake is a badass and it shows in her kid, Just what the doctor prescribed, Favorite Fics That I Hoard, Why...(°口°) ! (pages and pages of google docs links)▒(°ل°)▒, JustFabulous' Favorites, Tim Drake Fics to Hoard, Los mejores fics que he leído de DC Cómics, Kit's Favourite DC Fics, 🌑 ***Dark Matter*** 🌑, the criminally under appreciated vault, good soup/fics i adore, Ready To Reread, DC fics that are mostly batfam lol, Here there be Dragons 🐉, Morally bankrupt Tim, Gotham may be a dangerous city but it's ours, Works that haunt me, I slurp this DC up, Scintillating Serials

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Happy Families Kill People Too

by raven_of_hydecastle

Summary

Jack Drake loves his wife and son, even if they're giant, fire breathing reptiles that would rather eat the mailman than pick up a package. That's fine, he can deal. It'd just be nice if they weren't so territorial. Then they could actually be on the same continent without trying to kill each other. Oh well, every family has their challenges. The Drakes' just happen to be more homicidal than most.

Feat. Dragon Tim and Janet's loving (but murderous) relationship, Jack's ongoing attempts to be a good dad, and the Waynes getting increasingly concerned about Tim's home life after he becomes Robin.

Now with Attic Gremlins, Jason's Emotional Support Bazooka, speedsters, excessive amounts of PowerPoints, and Tim's mastery of communication as he shows off just how good his human act can be.

Notes

Most of this was written at 3AM by a crazy person (me) avoiding responsibilities, which is why it's so out there. That being said, this AU cracks me up and I'm having a blast, so I hope you guys do too.

To be clear, Janet loves Tim. Tim loves Janet. Both of them love Jack. There's just a bit of instinctual violence between Janet and Tim, but they're working on it. No need to give Jack a heart attack if they can help it, right?

Another shout out to Ravengranger for listening to me spiel about this for over an hour and take an eternity to decide on a title. Best beta/hypeman ever ;)

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 【授翻 | Batfamily | Tim中心】幸福的家庭也会杀人 | Happy Families Kill People Too by raven_of_hydecastle, SilverAsh018
- Inspired by Here There Be Drakes by Carlough

How to Raise your Dragon

Chapter Summary

Boy meets girl.

Girl is a dragon.

A love story for the ages.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim loved his mother, he really did. Janet went above and beyond to raise him, no matter how inconvenient it was for her. Jack, CPS, and humanity at large didn't agree with that statement, however. Funny how a few murder attempts got them so flustered.

The thing was, being dragons left Tim and Janet with very different definitions of parenting than the world at large. In the wild, dragons laid their eggs and *left.* There were no baby showers, photo albums, or birthday parties to complicate things. A dragon's parental obligations ended with hiding an egg in the wilderness, and that was something even a half breed like Tim instinctively understood. The fact that Janet hadn't eaten him intestines first was groundbreaking, if not miraculous, and Tim admired her for the self-control it took to do so. Only a truly loving mother would leave her spawn alive for so long, and Tim adored her as a consequence.

Jack didn't get this memo, however.

Jack didn't get *any* memos.

Sometimes, Tim wished his father had thought through the inter-species cultural misunderstandings more before marrying Janet. The man was obsessed with family bonding, even though his wife and son were decidedly against it. It had gotten to the point that the only thing Tim and his mom *actually* bonded over were increasingly creative ways to get out of it. But Jack remained stalwart in his efforts, no matter how many times they told him that if Tim got too close to Janet she'd go pray mantis and bite his head off now that Tim was old enough to register as an enemy dragon. Biology, right?

However, nothing got through to Jack-bull-headed-Drake. This was the man that thought a five-ton, fire-breathing reptile was a good life partner. Stubborn didn't begin to cover it.

And, to be fair, he so far had a good success rate of stopping the two of them from being actively homicidal. The first six years of Tim's life were idyllic. No maulings, cannibalism, or abandonment attempts at all! Tim was pretty sure that was a world record, not that anyone kept track.

Dragons were right up there with Mermen in terms of common knowledge. They existed in a loose, abstract way on the fringe of collective consciousness. People knew they were real, but not much else. The European breeds went extinct during the black plague and the African ones were only found underground. Their evolution decided wings weren't their thing, more's the pity. That left the Asian variety, and while they weren't endangered they certainly weren't common. People knew more about the deep sea than dragons, so there were no Mother of the Year Awards for them (though Janet totally earned one).

Janet was a Yinglong from Guangxi province, China. Jack had stumbled on her during one of his early digs as a graduate student. The story was adorable and bemusing, involving some ancient ruins, a clan of reclusive dragons, and a magic item that turned her human. The romance was just the cherry on top.

Janet got four things out of that debacle; a human form she could shift into, a doting husband, a human name (Jack wanted her to choose something Chinese, but she had a perfectly good dragon name, and she wanted her human one to sound close to it), and, of course, Tim.

Tim had no idea how he'd been born and refused to even look into it on the grounds of *ew*, but here he was. A human-dragon hybrid who'd inherited the same type of secondary form his mother used to masquerade as a normal human. Calling him a hybrid was being polite though. Both Tim and Janet agreed that he was as much a reptile as her; Jack's DNA was practically nonexistent.

Despite that, Jack had been ecstatic, even when baby-Tim started coughing smoke and clawing on the furniture. Tim had to be confined to the house until he could pass as a human, but in Jack's brain that just meant more family time. Those were the best years of Tim's life because Janet's "kill the miniature version of me" instincts hadn't kicked in yet. Jack said it was because she was on hormonal suppressors, which negated a lot of her natural aggression (yay, science!) but Tim suspected it was also because Tim posed literally no threat back then.

It was up to Jack to decide that Tim was good enough at hiding his shift to be allowed out and about. Tim thought he had ridiculously high standards, but Jack said not lighting the house on fire or keeping his tongue unforked wasn't a high bar.

Janet could pass as human, but only because her husband had spent years hammering etiquette into her lizard brain before introducing her to high society, but even after a solid decade of interacting with them, people still shivered when she entered a room and cast her cold, analytical eyes on them. Janet could pass as one of them, but nobody ever felt like she belonged, so Janet wasn't allowed to give Tim advice.

Tim, like his mother, had trouble with the social side of things. Humans didn't make sense to him. His *father* made no sense to him. He and Janet had many commiserating conversations about this.

"He is a silly little human," Janet would say, "but at least he is our silly little human."

Jack really was hopeless, but in a good way. Tim tolerated being hugged and tossed around by him, and Jack was very patient whenever Tim burned part of the house down, so Tim forgave a lot of his weird priorities and learned how to stay in human shape. It wasn't uncomfortable, although both he and Janet agreed it was annoying to hide who they were.

"Someday, you will fly on your own two wings like a proper dragon," she told him, tapping his cheek with a sharp claw. "But until then, we'll let your silly father get his wish. If he wants a happy family, we'll try to be one for him."

"Yes, momma," three-year-old Tim said, the s's ending in a hiss.

Dragons did not get along. That was a fact. The longer Tim was alive, the stronger his instincts got. Even as a toddler, there were days he wanted nothing more than to tear his mother's throat out and eliminate the threat she presented. He knew Janet felt the same, no matter how much she loved him. You could love someone and still want them dead.

Jack was the reason they didn't give in to those instincts. He was their common bond and darling human. Tim and Janet may have worn human skins as a guise, but Jack was what made them keep them on. He wasn't a perfect man (definitely not a smart one) but when dragons loved someone, it didn't matter.

Someday, Tim knew the shaky truce with his mother would break, and Tim would vanish into the wilderness to make his own way. Even back then, he fought against the need to travel and create his own territory, like other dragons his age were doing. Instincts could only be fought against for so long, but for now, he'd ignore them, because every other dragon had a nest and territory, but none of them had a mom and a dad, and even Tim's lizard brain knew not to throw that away quite yet.

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When Tim turned four, Jack declared he was "human enough" and enrolled him in preschool.

Janet blinked, over and over, bewildered by this turn of events.

"This is… a good idea?" she said.

"Yeah, he'll finally be around people his own age!" Jack said, brandishing the *Gotham Academy Jr.* pamphlets proudly. "Aren't you excited to socialize, Timmy? Make some human friends?"

Tim grinned in excitement. His baby teeth were dull enough to look normal, and he finally had control over his shifting. Plus, he hadn't started a house fire in two months. That was basically forever; he could handle a few baby humans.

Janet shrugged, going back to her breakfast or raw steak. Tim heard the T-bone crunch as she chewed. "If you say so, dear."

Even four years old, Timmy knew she was highly dubious about Tim's ability to get along with anyone, much less a human child.

And, well, she was right.

Jack had several more gray hairs by the time summer rolled around. Gotham Academy Jr. couldn't directly refuse to keep Tim enrolled, but they strongly encouraged finding him a placement "more suited to his needs."

In Tim's defense, how was he supposed to know it was impolite to bite people? That's what mouths were *for*.

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Janet's violent urges manifested when Tim was six, but they'd been building for years. Neither she nor Tim were surprised that they exploded, just that it had taken so long to do so.

One moment, Tim had been sneaking into the kitchen to eat raw shrimp, then he was bumping into Janet. The surprise was what did it. Janet snarled on instinct and lashed out with her claws. They raked across Tim's face and sent him to the hospital for sixteen stitches. His parents made up a story about a wild dog, which meant Tim also had to get tested for rabies.

Janet was apologetic in a "what can you do?" way that Tim understood on a spiritual level. No harm no foul, as far as he was concerned, although Jack was strangely upset.

"He could have died! How could you, Jan?" he wept, hugging Tim like a lifeline.

Tim awkwardly patted him on the back and shot a questioning look at his mother. Janet shrugged back, looking lost.

Dragons weren't good at comfort, apparently.

Two incidents and another hospital trip later, and they had a family meeting. Jack urged Janet to take higher doses of hormonal suppressants and "overcome her natural instincts," but Janet said they made her feel bloated. Besides, there was an easier solution. One Tim fully supported, because Jack really was oblivious. He had no clue that dragons *did not* share, so having two dragons with a loved one split between them was dynamite waiting to go off. He was Janet's mate and Tim's father, and both of them would go for the other's throat if their claim was contested. No amount of suppressants would fix that.

Janet's solution turned out to be leaving Gotham, Jack in tow. Tim pouted about that, but Janet *did* have rank, and Jack was smitten with her. Sure, he was upset about leaving Tim, but he could *never* abandon her. Not without Janet going as crazy as the Joker, anyway.

They decided to come back to Gotham every three to five months and keep in touch between. Tim, being six, was perfectly capable of looking after himself in either form and was excited to finally have free reign over the city. His brain was wired to fend for itself since day one. He had to constantly fight the urge to leave home and make his own territory elsewhere, or challenge Janet to take over her hoard, which Jack was part of. By human standards, what the Drakes were doing was criminally neglectful, but Tim was positively smothered by all their cuddling. He was ready for a change of pace.

"Are you absolutely sure?" Jack asked for the two thousandth time. "We can hire a nanny, or a babysitter, or —"

"I'm fine, Dad," Tim said, sharing another exasperated look with Janet. "Don't blow our cover by getting someone normal involved with us."

"Yes, you always say we have to stay hidden for some reason," Janet said. "We are simply humoring you."

Janet and Tim were *excellent* fake humans by now, but so many things would be easier if they were allowed to eat people who annoyed them, including the hypothetical human traffickers Jack was always worried about.

"I am grateful for that, but that's not why I'm worried. Timmy needs to socialize —"

"He will go to that human prison in the fall," Janet said. "That is socialization."

"For the last time, Jan, school is not a prison —"

"It looks like one."

“ *Jan.*”

They left eventually. Took long enough.

To distract Jack from his worries about CPS, Janet took them both on an archeological dig to reenact their honeymoon. It worked so well that digs became their go-to getaway, and Janet even made a hoard out of all the materials they found.

Tim was just glad they never brought home another sibling. Two dragons in their house was quite enough, thank you.

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Years passed, and distance really was the key to their family's success. Jack insisted on weekly phone calls, talking to Tim so often it felt like he’d never left. Once Skype became popular, Jack paid a fortune for satellite signals in remote areas to gush over his son’s face.

“You’re getting so big!” he said when Tim turned nine. He said it *every* video call.

“That’s what growing does, Jack,” Janet said in the background, not even bothering to look at Tim.

Tim was on his computer, scrolling through various Batman sightings while his father cooed. Whenever Jack had a question for him he shrugged and gave short answers.

“How is school?”

“Like prison.”

“Did you make any friends?”

“No. Why can’t I eat the ones I don’t like?”

“That’s a good question. Why can’t he, Jack?”

“Not now, Janet… How about hobbies? Do you have any hobbies, Timmy?”

Jack sounded almost pleading. Tim ran a hand through his hair, careful not to nick himself on his claws, which he liked to let out when he was home. His eyes strayed to the terrible, low-res photo of Batman jumping onto a building.

“Uh, I’m thinking of getting into photography?” he said.

Janet raised her eyebrow as Jack beamed.

“Photography? That’s so normal. Wonderful!” he said. “Timmy, I am so proud of you. I’ll buy you every model of camera to exist. That’s my boy. You’re doing so well!”

“Suuuuure,” Tim said. “I’m acting very human. Yay.”

“Yes, you are!”

Janet, apparently, was done with the phone call. She walked over and ended the transmission, looking exasperated. Tim could relate. He sagged into his chair and resigned himself to following through on his new hobby, if only to stop Jack from getting more gray hair over his son being the school weirdo.

He probably wouldn’t be thrilled if Tim mentioned he was going to stalk local legends through Crime Alley during the dead hours of the night, but what Jack didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. Janet, at least, would approve. Anything involving mortal peril was an acceptable hobby for a dragon.

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Humans were funny little creatures. Tim was tiny as well, but he was still a class above homo sapiens. They were just so strange. It was endlessly amusing to watch them.

Janet felt the same, which was why she tolerated galas so much. She loved pinning people with her unnervingly pale eyes (the wrong color for a Chinese native, people whispered, but never said to her face) and watching them squirm. All their petty politics were so quaint and convoluted that she couldn't help but stick her nose into it. Once, she confessed to Tim that she liked to follow people home to see what they did behind closed doors. It ranged from sex to murder, with all kinds of nonsense between, and she never got tired of what it would be on a given night, especially in Gotham.

As Tim stalked Batman and Robin through Crime Alley, he reflected that he and Janet were very similar. Apparently, the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

It was tempting to eat the occasional thug, but Jack was very firm about that rule, so Tim never did. Dad would probably cry if he found out, and Tim was terrible at anything involving emotions. Best not to risk it.

The thugs Batman left tied up in alleys probably tasted nasty anyway. This is why Tim brought goldfish with him for snacks instead; no infectious diseases from those! (Although the Petsmart employees were giving him weird looks for buying so many).

He got photo after photo of the dynamic duo, pinning each one on his wall for safekeeping. It was no hoard, but it was an impressive collection, and he puffed proudly to know he put it together all by himself.

Janet was also proud of it once she got back and saw all his hard work.

"Very good instincts, and you weren't caught once?" she said. "You are ready to forge your own way. You don't need us anymore. You are now a proper adult."

"Yes!" Tim said. He already had a go-bag and a hitchhiking route to Alaska prepared. Proper adulthood, here he came. So long, idyllic yet constricting childhood.

“No!” Jack said quickly. “Tim is not leaving.”

And then he dropped the bombshell that human children had to stay home until they were eighteen.

Janet and Tim looked at him as if he’d just launched a nuclear warhead at a chinchilla.

“Eighteen years?” she said blankly. “What is *wrong* with your species?”

Tim felt like he should have known this. His classmates had older siblings that were teenagers and none of *them* had their own nests. But… but they didn’t count. They shouldn’t. Tim had only stayed *this* long because his parents gave him a continent of space. He and Janet would kill each other if they had to continue this for much longer.

“I can’t believe you two never realized this,” Jack sighed. “We’ll have to fix this. Janet, cancel our summer trips. We’re going to have another crash course on humanity, family style.”

Both dragons shared a look of abject horror.

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Lessons on humanity sucked. They only existed to show how little Tim paid attention in school. He and Janet did their best, but there were just some things that would *never* make sense to them.

“This is *bad,*” Jack said, pointing to the word ‘murder’ he’d written on the whiteboard behind them. “Repeat after me: bad.”

“Bad,” Janet said slowly, squinting at the word suspiciously.

“Great! Now you, Timmy.”

“Murder is…” Tim said. “Not good.”

“Please use the correct terminology, Timothy,” Jack said. “I need you to retain this.”

“It’s bad,” he said, sliding further down his seat. “Are you happy?”

“Yes, very. Now, this brings me to my next point,” Jack said. “As you know, murder is *bad*, but some kinds are even worse. Do you know what kinds?”

Tim and Janet both looked surreptitiously around, hoping there would be some kind of hint. Jack looked at the ceiling briefly, probably doing that human custom of praying for strength.

“Okay, maybe this will help,” he said, then wrote another ‘child’ over ‘murder.’

Tim and Janet stared at the board for a solid ten seconds, then his mother gasped in triumph.

“A child! A child is worse than murder!” she said.

Tim quickly wrote that in his notebook.

Jack banged his head against the whiteboard and groaned.

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“Practical application of human customs,” Jack said, once it was clear neither dragon was making progress via white-board quizzes. “Immersive studies always have better results.”

Immersive studies like camping, kayaking, and other two-legged hobbies that seemed more trouble than they were worth. Tim only shifted into his dragonic form every three months so his growth wouldn't be stunted, but as soon as they pulled up to "happy camper's RV park!" he made a break for the mountains.

Janet bodyslammed him to the ground, venomous teeth an inch from his ear as she hissed, "If I have to suffer through this, you will too!"

Tim took back every nice thing he said about his parents. They were sadists, the both of them.

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Other highlights of the summer included learning to set boundaries. Dragon boundaries, specifically. That was Jack's homework, and unlike the "being human" lessons this one actually got results.

Mostly, because Janet *and* Tim had to go ER at several points because their aggressive instincts were getting stronger. The older Tim got, the more instinctual it was to bare his teeth at Janet in challenge, and she would respond with a vicious swipe of her claws. There was no bad blood between them, it was just how dragons were. Janet's clan in Guangxi had been tight-knit by dragon standards, but they still left several mountains between each family member and only gathered in person every century.

Two dragons in one house? They were lucky to still have all their limbs.

Jack still naively believed with enough cuddling, hugs, and movie nights that they could transcend their biology, but after Tim nearly lost an eye and Janet had a chunk of her bicep bitten off, even he had to compromise.

They ended up dividing the house into sections, even going as far as to tape a line down the center of each hallway. One side was Tim's, the other Janet's. It felt like something out of a cartoon, but it cut down the violent altercations by 40%, so Tim wasn't complaining.

Still, they were all glad when summer was over and they were separated once more. Tim thanked every star in the sky once he had the house to himself. He loved his mother, he really did, but there

were only so many murder attempts he could stand before he started getting twitchy.

As his parents drove to the airport, Tim settled back into his normal routine. Drake Manor sat empty on the hill, populated only by a tiny, self-sufficient dragon with a stalking habit. The only sound was the scuttle of his claws on the marble floors and the shutter of his camera at midnight.

Some would call it lonely, but Tim wouldn’t have it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

Jack Drake *a tired college grad meeting a dragon*: wow, you are prime wife material. Will you marry me?
Janet (thoughts): well, he's already such a mess. It's not like I can make him worse.
Janet: sure okay Lmao

Years later
Tim: Dad, you're an idiot.

Murder is a Valid Love Language

Chapter Summary

Robin II is dead, and Dragons suck at giving comfort. Luckily, Janet has some great tips for revenge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the first time in two years, Tim was calling his parents. Usually, Jack was the one who initiated contact. Janet and Tim were happy ignoring each other for months at a time unless he forced them to talk, so this was highly unusual. But Tim needed to hear his parents' voices right now.

His father picked up on the first ring, looking alarmed. "Tim, what's wrong? Are you okay? Timmy, *are you crying?"*

Tim nodded and blew his nose on another tissue. His eyes were puffy from sobbing all day and he'd wrapped himself in his favorite blanket for comfort. So far, the stupid piece of fabric hadn't helped at all.

Janet wandered over, brow furrowed. She never left Jack's side, and for once Tim was grateful for that.

"Hatchling, what's wrong?" she said.

Janet *never* called him that unless she was trying to do Emotions. It meant she was trying to show she cared. Tim sobbed louder.

Janet reeled back in alarm, then glared at Jack. "He gets this from *your* side of the family."

"Expressing feelings is perfectly healthy for *everyone*," Jack sniped back. "Even dragons need to cry."

"*I* never did," Janet said, frowning at Tim. "Why is he?"

"Yes, Timmy, what's wrong?" Jack said, spinning back to the camera. "Are you sick? Hurt? Is someone bullying you at school? If they are I give you permission to bite them, just this once—"

Tim choked on another sob, howled, "Robin is dead!" then went back to crying.

Both his parents froze. Jack looked flabbergasted, but Janet's expression turned sympathetic.

"Robin? The sidekick you like?" Jack said. "I thought he became a new hero?"

"Don't be ridiculous, that was the previous one," Janet corrected, squeezing into the chair with Jack. She *never* stayed on camera for more than thirty seconds. "Batman got a replacement. Tim told us over two years ago."

"R-right," Jack looked surprised Janet had remembered. But that was silly. Janet and Tim couldn't spend more than two minutes beside each other without trying to bite their heads off and their phone calls were usually very short, but they still loved each other. Also, they had perfect recollaction. Remembering things was *easy.*

"You and your poor memory," Janet rolled her eyes, then leaned toward the screen. "What happened, hatchling?"

Tim wiped his nose on his sleeve and stuttered out what he'd pieced together. He'd been following the Bats for years now, despite Jack's concerns, and had kept his parents updated on all the vigilante drama. Tim didn't know exactly what happened to Jason, but he was sure as heck fire seeing the fallout.

Joker had gotten out of Arkham. Three weeks later Robin was gone. Two days after that Joker was put in ICU, and a week after *that* a drug cartel had twenty people left for dead on the street by the Bat, and the boy in red still was nowhere to be seen.

Tim had hoped Jason was just hurt real bad, but then Batman and Nightwing had a screaming match on a rooftop and they said—they said—

Time hunched over the monitor and kept crying. Batman's hoarse voice was on loop in his head. *"Robin is dead!"*

When he finally calmed down enough to pay attention to his surroundings, Jack was muttering soothing things over the monitor, looking panicked beyond belief.

"We'll come home right away, you shouldn't be alone for this, don't worry sweetheart we've got you—"

"No," Janet said.

Jack whirled on his wife. "No? Janet, he needs us. Look at him! It's one thing to leave him home for months, I'm not neglecting him emotionally too. We're his parents, we have to—"

"No," Janet said again, a note of steel in her voice that she never used on Jack, "Let me talk to Timothy. *Alone*, please."

Jack worked his jaw, parental instincts on high alert. But Janet was staring him down like she did to humans at galas, the full weight of her draconic nature behind her. She wasn't Janet right now; she was a Guangxi dragon that could eviscerate an elephant with a casual swipe of her claw. Even her human form couldn't hide the raw otherness of her nature.

Jack swallowed, breathed hard, and got to his feet.

"Fine," he said quietly. "*Fine* , but this isn't over."

He left the tent. Tim caught a glimpse of sunlight through the flap, shining down on a South American dig sight doing something with dinosaur bones.

(Janet loved paleontological digs. She found them hilarious, partly because she occasionally found an ancestor's bones mixed in with the rest).

The dragon leaned forward, losing some of the sharpness in her eyes. Now, it was just a terrible, weighty understanding.

“Timothy,” she said. “Hatchling, I’m sorry you are experiencing this so young. It is never easy to lose part of your hoard.”

“My—?” he began, then hiccuped. *“Oh.”*

Dragons didn’t get emotional often. They were very laissez-faire about life, partly because they lived so long. Tim didn’t care when any of his childhood pets died, but this had him sobbing. All for a boy he hadn’t even talked to. If Tim had unconsciously labeled him as part of his hoard, then this emotional gut punch made sense.

Janet gave a perfunctory nod. “We are greedy creatures, Tim, we don’t like losing what we’ve claimed. There is no greater pain than that, which is why I can’t be with you right now, and neither should Jack.”

Tim stared at her in shock. For the first time, he didn’t understand what Janet was saying. They had always been on the same wavelength, but he was missing something in this conversation. Maybe Jack’s attempts to humanize him had worked after all?

Janet huffed, wrinkling her nose as she looked for a way to explain.

“Jack thinks you are weak,” she said slowly, “a child, a helpless baby. Mammals like him want to smother weaknesses until they disappear, but that is not our way.”

She reached up and put her hand against the computer screen. Tim clumsily followed suit.

“You are uniquely challenged,” She said. “To human eyes, you are a child, but even if your body still has room to grow a dragon’s heart is different. In *my* eyes, you have always been my equal.”

Tim straightened, blinking away residual tears. His mother's words resonated with him, calling to the part of him that Jack tried to smother with hugs and affection. A wild, untameable piece of his soul.

"There is no comfort I can offer a grieving dragon," Janet continued. "Even if Jack thinks we will bond over sadness, approaching a wounded creature like you will only end in blood."

"*I* didn't get hurt," Tim said. "Jason was the one who died."

Janet blinked slowly, like a lizard. "Not all wounds have visible scars, hatchling. Your father thinks you need to be coddled, but he is wrong. Creating a hoard is one thing, but losing a piece of it is entirely another. Both are rites of passage for our kind."

Tim curled his hands into fists. His claws were out—he was too emotional to look completely human right now. Stray scales and horn nubs littered his skin. Through the haze of sadness, he processed Janet's words.

"So I… I have to go through this alone?" he said.

Janet scoffed. "Dragons are always alone, Timothy, but this is hardly something you must weather in isolation. You may call us for… emotional support," she scowled in derision at the words. "But don't mistake your true nature. Do you really want comfort now, or is that simply something the humans taught you to seek out?"

He snapped his mouth shut, newly grown fangs clicking together. It was like a fog cleared from his head. Clarity snapped into place.

"...No," he said, then louder. "No!"

Jason was *dead.* Part of his hoard—a collection so important it was tied to his soul—was taken from him by a madman. Tim hadn't even protected Jason. He'd failed to guard what was his.

A stream of smoke escaped through his nose. Tim was *angry.*

“I’m going to kill the Joker,” he hissed, eyes blazing. “I’m going to make him pay.”

Janet looked almost proud as Tim hissed, and all at once Tim understood what she meant.

Sadness didn’t solve problems. Anger did. And Tim was going to fix things if it was the last thing he did.

“Have fun in Colombia,” he said tightly. “Don’t bother coming home. I don’t want you here.”

“That’s my boy,” she said, grinning with all her teeth. “We will see you next Fall. Make him suffer.”

“With pleasure,” Time growled. A fire ignited in his heart, demanding violence as quickly as possible. For once, he had no intention of ignoring the impulse.

Dragons weren’t emotional creatures. They preferred to distance themselves from feelings. But when they hit, they hit *hard* and logic flew out the window. The Joker wouldn’t even see him coming.

***

Tim had a graphically violent plan for the Joker. The only problem was getting to him.

Dragon or not, Tim wasn’t able to get into Arkham by himself. Security wasn’t airtight, but after Jason Todd’s murder, Bruce Wayne donated more money than some countries’ GDP to improve it. The new master hacker, Oracle, had even offered their assistance to make the firewall virtually impenetrable.

Tim prowled the perimeter for hours, hiding from cameras as he searched for a way inside, his anger only increasing.

He'd thought about sending a letter bomb but quickly dismissed the idea. Even if security spotted it and figured "what the hell, let's give it to the Joker anyway," Tim didn't want someone else accidentally getting hurt. Poisoning the food delivery was nixed for the same reason, and Tim wasn't getting good enough at hacking fast enough to break in himself.

He ranted about this to Janet. She didn't like skype calls, but was willing to power through them since they were discussing murder. Jack, realizing there were only so many battles he could win, was just glad she and Tim were voluntarily speaking to each other, and left the tent whenever it got too grisly.

The long and short of it was that Tim was failing. He couldn't avenge his Robin until Joker got out, and who knew when that would be? And hoping for the lunatic to break free made Tim feel sick because that was basically saying he was fine with Joker hurting more people like he did to Jason.

Janet only had a teaspoon of sympathy, and she'd used that up on the broken hoard conversation. Her suggestions were more pragmatic now, and always unemotional.

"Find something else to do while you wait then," she said, "or approach the problem from another angle. Don't just sit around and wallow. You're a dragon, act like it."

So Tim took her words to heart, grabbed his camera, and prowled Gotham again. Taking pictures at least got his mind off Jason's murder, and it gave him a chance to see how his remaining hoard was doing.

Oh.

Batman was not doing well at *all.*

Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in Tim's head. That was something he could fix. Finally, there was something he could do to help.

***

To Tim's delight, Bruce Wayne had the mannerisms of a dragon. He was unsocial, moody, hated small talk, and solved most problems with violence. Nightwing and Alfred rolled their eyes whenever Batman grunted monosyllables at them, but Tim loved it.

Finally, someone who spoke his language.

Taking Jason's place hadn't been his intention, but it got results. Even better, it got him up close and personal with his hoard, which now included *Alfred Pennyworth* , who was a treasure in of himself.

This was where he belonged. This was where he thrived.

Gotham's streets were his territory, and now he could finally protect them. His hoard was his family, and now he understood why Janet was so territorial around Jack. If another dragon got close to the Waynes, Tim wouldn't hesitate to tear their throats out. Janet had such good self-control.

Nightwing even started coming back! He helped train Tim in the evenings, took him train surfing, and bought him ice cream. It was a like a more dangerous version of Jack's bonding activities he forced Janet and Tim to go on over the years. Tim enjoyed Dick's attempts much more, though that was mostly because he wasn't in enclosed spaces with a territorial dragon.

Janet was thrilled he was staking out his own domain. Thirteen years of child-rearing was *way* more than she signed up for, and she made a point of telling Tim that he had no need of her in his life anymore.

"Don't say that, we love him!" Jack replied. "Tim, remember, we love you. Both of us, even if Janet is emotionally stunted. Just hold tight until we get back so I can hug you properly, okay?"

"You're weird, Dad," Tim said. "You don't have to come home now. I'm *fine."*

"You're my legal responsibility until you're eighteen, don't take this from me!" Jack snapped.

Tim and Janet rolled their eyes. Humans.

Chapter End Notes

Jack: Hun, maybe don't teach Tim it's okay to murder people.
Janet: Even the Joker?
Jack *sighs*: yes even the Joker.
Tim: ew, you sound like Batman. murder is fun!
Jack: Listen young man, while you're under my roof you will not cannibalize anyone. It's a family rule.
Tim: But I'm a dragon, it's not canabalism--
Jack: it's close enough! Don't make me get out the spray bottle.
Tim & Janet: *hisses*

Romance? What's that? Can you eat it?

Chapter Summary

Tim becomes Robin, dispels some weird concerns the Waynes have about his home life, and gets his first exposure to romance. The moral of that story? Never go to Dick for advice EVER, it will only lead to reality TV and trauma.

Chapter Notes

Am I uploading way too much of this at once? Yes, Yes I am. I have a lot backlogged. 0-0

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack was getting gray hair at an alarming rate. He was terrified Tim would be murdered on the street, taken by whatever CPS was, or forget he had a family and fly off into the sunset never to return. Nothing Janet and Tim said helped ease these worries (mostly because they were all very real possibilities and they sucked at comforting people) so something had to be done.

Tim ended up promising to come home every night. If his dad knew their nest was still occupied it'd soothe his nerves, probably.

His parents weren't due to come home for another six months (thanks to Janet for changing their itinerary on the sly, saving the dragons from another awful camping trip) but Tim made sure his scent still permeated the building. Jack *claimed* he couldn't smell either of them, but Tim didn't buy that. What kind of weak-ass scent glands did humans have if they missed something as obvious as that?

At first, the Waynes were fine with him going home, but after a while they started getting weird about it.

"Are you sure you don't want to spend the night?" Bruce asked. "It's no trouble."

"It's fine, I don't live here," Tim said, putting the rest of his Robin uniform in his locker. "Besides, I don't think Dick would like it if I stayed. I look too much like Jay—uh, like my predecessor."

Bruce's face crumpled. Mentioning Jason was a low blow, but this was the third time in two weeks Bruce had nagged him about staying over and Tim was tired of making new excuses. Humans were weird about where people slept. Jack insisted Janet stay in the same bed as him, and made Tim stay in the same house, and now Bruce Wayne was getting territorial too. Was it a guy thing? Did all men get huffy if people didn't nap in the right spots? Humans, ugh.

Tim's theory that it was gender-based got more clout when Dick approached a few days later, smiling gently in his Nightwing uniform as they got ready for patrol.

"Hey Timmy," he said. "How are you doing? Holding up okay?"

Emotions? In this conversation? Oh no, not on his watch.

"I just oiled my grapple," Tim said. "That was the last thing I had to fix before patrol. I'm thinking of adding another setting to it, a decreased speed for greater accuracy."

Batman perked up in the corner, looking interested. He opened his mouth and Tim mentally patted himself on the back for a good redirect. But then Dick looked pointedly at Bruce until he shut his mouth and shuffled away, looking dejected. Tim stared after the Dark Knight in shock; the technical mumbo jumbo *always* worked, what was going on?

Dick rested a hand on Tim's shoulder, and the dragon tensed. Where was Janet? He needed someone to try and maul him so he could escape whatever was coming.

"Bruce mentioned you're having a hard time feeling comfortable here, that's all," Nightwing said. "You don't have to compare yourself to Jason, you're both very different people. You're not a replacement for him, okay?"

Tim's mind blanked. Then incredulous shock made him stumble back.

"Bruce snitched on me?" He demanded, spinning around to look for the traitor. "You guys don't even talk!"

Especially not about Jason. What the hell? Why did Bruce have to break character *now* ?

“Hey, it’s alright, he didn’t go into specifics,” Dick said, putting his hands up. “He’d never break confidence if it wasn’t important. He’s just doing his best, you know? If he overstepped I’ll talk to him, but he's just worried.”

Tim folded his arms and huffed. “Why, because I want to go back to my own home and sleep in my own bed? That’s normal, Dick.”

Dick cringed, smiling awkwardly. A bat-shaped lump hunched its shoulders in the distance, looking embarrassed even from the other side of the cave.

“Haha, yeah, that’s overbearing,” Dick said. “He probably forgot you’re not an orphan. He likes taking in strays. It’d be weird to have sleepovers at a grown man’s house. Your parents would probably freak out, huh?”

Oh, well that was a misunderstanding he could dispel, at least.

“Not really,” Tim shrugged. “They’re not even in the country. They don’t care what I get up to when they’re gone.”

Well, not Janet anyway. Jack put up a token effort to make Tim live a “healthy” life but there wasn’t much he could do from Ecuador. Once he’d jokingly threatened to cut off Tim’s credit line, but even if by some chance that happened Tim could hunt just fine. He liked raw meat, especially when it wriggled.

“They’re… not home?” Dick said slowly. “For how long?”

Tim did some rough math, then realized he didn’t actually know.

“What month is it?” he asked Alfred as he passed by, a tea tray balanced on his fingertips.

“April, young master,” Alfred said. He walked over to Bruce, who was now lurking by the Batmobile, and gave him a cup of licorice tea.

Tim counted on his fingers, guesstimating how long Janet could keep them both safe from Jack’s horrible attempts at family vacations.

“Five or six months?” he said. “Maybe longer if they find a good dig site. Mom’s *really* good at getting permits.”

Avoiding mortal combat with her only spawn was great motivation. Getting out of more How to be Human classes also helped.

Tim stroked his chin, wondering how creative Janet would get this time around. Last year, she’d hired a grave robber onto their archaeological team, knowing they would steal some valuable artifacts. Jack and Janet had to spend another month painstakingly tracking each piece down and had only had time to return to Gotham for a few weeks before their annual trip to Singapore’s anthropological conference. Maybe this year Janet would sabotage their private jet and get them trapped on a private island? That would be hilarious.

“—immy?” Dick said, waving a hand in front of Tim’s face.

Tim blinked. “Wha?”

“I asked who’s looking after you right now,” he said. “Alfred wants to have their number in case we have to make a cover.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Tim nodded, “but you don’t have to worry about that. I can take care of myself.”

Dick, Alfred, and Bruce all exchanged confused glances.

“What do you mean?” Dick said carefully.

Was this…. Oh, yeah, they were getting weird again. Good to know that it wasn’t just Jack and the mythical CPS he was always talking about that cared about this stuff. (Tim really needed to get out of the house more.)

“My parents aren’t going to waste money hiring someone when I’m fine on my own,” Tim said, rolling his eyes. “I haven’t ever needed a nanny. And a good thing, too! That sounds awful.”

Just thinking about someone else trying to parent him was gross. Jack was smothering enough and he was rarely on the same *continent* as Tim. It was a good thing the bats already had each other to dote on. The last thing Tim needed was more human affection.

“Bruce, are you done suiting up?” he asked, clipping his grapple to his belt. “I’m ready for patrol!”

“Uh, Tim, I actually think we should keep talking about this—” Dick said, but Tim was already hopping over to the batmobile.

He got into the front seat and grinned wickedly at Nightwing. Shotgun was *his.*

The Waynes shared another look, then dispersed. Batman and Nightwing got into the car and they rushed into Gotham.

A few minutes later and Tim was swinging from roof to roof, gleefully comparing how different this felt from normal flying.

Batman and Nightwing kept pausing to whisper in dark corners, but Tim ignored them. He’d had enough conversation for one night, thank you.

***

“Mom, it’s terrible,” Tim groaned weeks later, “they’re doing that *thing.”*

She winced in sympathy.

“What thing?” Jack asked. “The Waynes do a thing? Should I be concerned? Tim, this is a safe place. You can’t always come to me about anything—”

Janet sighed longsufferingly as Tim banged his head on the keyboard. “Now you’re doing it too. Just stop, Dad. Please.”

“What did I do?”

“You’re being emotional, honey,” Janet said distastefully. “it’s unbecoming.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Pardon me, I just want you both to be okay.”

“As long as you’re fine, we are,” Janet said. “Now go outside and amuse yourself. There are some birds nearby. Go stare at them with your telescopes or something.”

Jack was dressed in khaki with binoculars hanging off his neck. If Tim recalled, they were somewhere in Indonesia, doing a spontaneous birding tour. It was Jack’s latest hyper fixation and Janet mentioned wanting to try new kinds of poultry, so it was a serendipitous moment of marital unity. However, even the reminder of their current vacation wasn’t enough to distract Jack from the conversation.

“Nice try,” he said, “but if I leave you two alone you’ll end the call in four minutes. I want to talk to my son.”

“Four minutes is a long time,” Time argued. “You should be proud of us.”

He and Janet even had one on one conversations now. *Willingly.* That was a big deal.

“I know, and I am. But still, let an old man have his pleasures. I won’t be here forever, you know,” he said.

Both Tim and Janet exchanged panicked looks. Dragons lived hundreds of years, and the reminder that Jack *didn’t* was horrible. Jack’s trump card was his mortality, and he knew just when to use it.

“Tell me about these ‘things,’” Jack said, once Janet and Tim settled in for an actual conversation. “What has you so annoyed?”

Tim puffed his cheeks, resisting the urge to spit smoke. “They keep asking about stuff. Like, what I eat, what I like, when the last time I bought new clothes was. It’s ridiculous. I can buy my own clothes!”

“Yes, but do you?” Jack said, taking a closer look at Tim’s sweats. They were three years old and threadbare.

“I don’t like to, that doesn’t mean I can’t,” Tim said. “Don’t judge me. You’re lucky I don’t walk around the house naked.”

That had been a habit that took over a year for Janet to break in the early days of their marriage. Tim was very well house-trained compared to her.

“Dick keeps bringing up school as well. He said I should have more friends my age,” Tim grumbled.

“Disturbing,” Janet said.

“Thank you,” Tim agreed. Dragons stayed away from their own generation. It was either attack on sight or mate. There was no between.

“I think some friends would be great for you, actually,” Jack interjected. “How’s Sebastion doing? Do you two still talk?”

Ives had been in Tim’s elementary school and was one of his early bite victims. Luckily, the kid thought his new scar was cool and they’d become fast friends. Jack had actually cried when Tim announced someone spoke to him and didn’t run screaming for the hills. He’d been more emotional than some parents were when their children got married. He was probably hoping Ives and Tim would have a lifelong friendship spanning decades of hardship, racial differences, and economic backgrounds.

“He moved to Canada,” Tim said bluntly, crushing those dreams. “Everyone else thinks I’m creepy.”

“Excellent,”’ Janet said proudly.

“ *Not* excellent,” Jack retorted. “Listen to Dick, son, please. At the very least, having some more friends will get him to leave you alone.”

Tim hummed noncommittally. That was a valid point. The Waynes were worried because he didn’t fit into the traditional human mold. Maybe they’d ask less questions if he seemed more normal.

“I guess I can give it a try,” he said reluctantly.

Jack cheered.

***

“I did what you said and made a friend,” Tim told Nightwing on patrol a month later.

Dick beamed at him like it was Christmas. Tim saw him subtly turn the comms onto the open channel. Great, now Oracle and Batman would hear them too. Yay.

“That’s great Robin,” he said. “Who is it? Someone from school?”

“Nope.”

“A family friend?”

“Uh uh.”

“...a homeless person?”

Tim squinted at Dick. “Why are those your first three options?”

Dick shrugged. “I just thought to myself, who would Robin willingly speak to? And that was what came to mind.”

Well, that was fair.

“It’s not a homeless person, but I did meet her on the street,” Tim said. “She threw a brick at my face.”

There was a quiet snickering from Oracle’s comm line. Tim ignored it, more focused on recording the dismayed expression on Dicks’ face. That was not the expected reaction.

“Actually, there she is now,” Tim said, pointing to a street corner.

Spoiler jumped out of the shadows, holding a two-liter bottle of pepsi. She whammed it into a mugger’s face and beat him with it until the plastic bottle exploded, getting fizz everywhere. She stood over the fallen thug and released a scream of victory.

“Hi Spoy!” Tim yelled, waving.

“Hi idiot!” she yelled back. “Hi larger, sexier idiot!”

Tim turned to Dick. “Isn’t she cool?”

Dick didn't reply. He was too busy banging his head against the nearest fire escape. Oracle kept laughing on the comms, though Tim had no clue why.

***

“It didn’t work,” Tim told Janet on their next call. His parents were somewhere in Australia now. Janet was munching on a giant spider. “But I think Spoiler could be in my hoard once I get to know her better. She’s fun.”

“That’s good, “Jack said, eyeing Janet’s spider warily. It twitched as she bit off another leg. “More friends is good.”

“I don’t know why she wants to kiss me though,” Tim said. “I thought boys had cooties. Girls are allergic to those, right?”

Jack choked on air. Janet just shrugged.

Useless, the both of them.

***

Steph, as it turned out, was romantically interested in him. It took her kissing Tim three times before he suspected that was the case, and not just because she’d been covered in Ivy’s pollen or something. It was Gotham, stranger things had happened.

Now Tim was in a quandary, because on one hand Steph was cool. She threw a *brick* at his *face,* there was nothing more awesome than that. But unlike his mom, Tim didn't really want to date his own hoard. That was weird. But he wanted Steph to stay his friend, so he didn't know what to do.

This was why feelings were stupid and shouldn't exist. Human things were the worst, and all his dragon instincts would do was ruin this relationship completely. He'd have to actually research this, dangit.

"Hey Dick," he said in resignation one afternoon, after the Waynes invited him over for lunch. "Did you still want to watch Paradise Island together?"

Dick looked up from his coco-puff/lucky charm/Trix combo cereal like a dog smelling peanut butter. "Oh my gosh, *yes,* this is going to be so much fun! Hang on I'll grab the DVDs—"

He ran off to grab his complete, limited-edition collection.

Bruce peeked over the top of his newspaper, looking disturbed.

"You want to watch a reality TV show?" he said. "*You*?"

Tim sank deeper into his chair. "It's for research."

Bruce stared at him for another few seconds, then slowly lifted the paper back up. "Of course."

Dick came back and dragged Tim to the media room, babbling about his favorite seasons and guest stars. As the campy, lo-fi intro music started playing and identical blond women in swimsuits appeared onscreen, Tim had a feeling that he'd made a terrible mistake.

***

“So, little man,” Jack grinned next week when Tim called for their usual skype. “How’s your girlfriend? And by girlfriend, I mean a girl who is a friend, not a *girlfriend* girlfriend. But if you *want* her to be more I have some tips—”

“Romance is dead,” Tim said woodenly. “I rejected her. I’m never pursuing a relationship, *ever.* Try to set me up and I’ll become a celebate monk. Goodbye, Father.”

“Wait, what are you—” Jack began, but Tim was already ending the call.

The screen blacked out and Tim got up to take another shower. No matter how many he had, he still felt tainted by that awful TV show. He was never trusting Dicks’ recommendations again, and he was staying single for *eternity.*

Chapter End Notes

Tim: yes I work with Batman and regularly bring kids to foster homes and safe spaces. Do I think CPS is real? Nah, sounds fake. Pretty sure my dad just made that up so I'd behave.
Janet *nodes in dragon*
Jack *contemplates walking into the ocean*

A Satisfying Crunch

Chapter Notes

CW for animal death (and past, referenced animal death).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the horror that was Dick's taste in TV, Steph's cold shoulder after he rejected her (even when he offered to let her brain him with another brick), and Batman's weirdly specific questions about his home life, Tim was happy.

Sure, the Joker was still alive, but Tim figured it was a matter of time before he got good enough at hacking to get in and out of Arkham's new security undetected. That man's days were numbered, and Tim's plans for him got more violent with each day that passed.

Other than that though, things were good. He went to school, slept through half his classes and skived during the rest, went home to eat dinner and scent Drake Manor, hopped over next door for his nightly training, and then spent hours beating up criminals. It became a routine, and the longer it went on the more relaxed Tim felt with the Waynes. His scent was all over their home, and he felt warm and fuzzy when he got to spend time with them. Once summer hit, he got even *more* time with them, and Janet promised to stay abroad until August at least. Everything was going his way.

Or so he thought.

"Happy birthday, sport!" Jack said, clambering up the front steps to give him a hug. "Fourteen already, time sure flies. Just look at you, you're shooting up like a weed!"

"No I'm not," Tim said, "I'm tiny. Mom, Dad, what are you doing here? It's June, you have a dig in Indonesia right now."

He glanced at Janet, who grimaced apologetically.

“Well, I wasn’t going to miss your birthday again, was I?” Jack said, ruffling his hair. “Jan must have forgotten in all the excitement, but I’ve been counting down the days!”

“But-But your plane,” Tim said, giving Janet another look. “Don’t the pilots need a lot of notice? Karl is on sabbatical until July.”

Jack waved that little detail away. “I don’t mind flying economy now and then. I’m rich, but I’m not *that* snobbish. Besides, I wanted to surprise both my drakes. You should have seen your mother’s face when I told her we were coming home early.”

Tim didn’t need to. He just wondered how Jack could look at Janet’s death glare at think it was attractive. Had he learned *nothing* during the course of their marriage?

Janet was standing thirty feet away with one foot still in the taxi. The driver was looking increasingly uncomfortable. Her left eye was twitching and Tim saw her flex her fingers.

Great, another biological clock must have gone off. Tim hoped his scent wasn’t stronger than the last time she visited and—oh no. Tim had his own *hoard* now, which meant it’d be even harder for them to coexist.

Lovely. Thanks, Dad.

“Jan, come on over and get a look at Tim!” the traitor in question said. “He’s got your eyes and hair and, well, *everything.* It’s so adorable.”

Janet stiffly walked away from the taxi but stayed at the base of the steps. The driver scrambled out of their seat, threw the luggage out of the trunk, and peeled out of the driveway without even waiting for a tip.

Lucky bastard.

“Hmm, that was unprofessional,” Jack said absently, walking over to his suitcase. “I hope nothing was broken. What do you two feel like for dinner? I’m thinking lobster. You both like lobster,

right?”

“Sure, Dad,” Tim said, locked into a staring contest with his mother, who was growling dangerously. “That sounds nice.”

***

Between dinner courses, Tim let Bruce know that his parents flew into town last minute, so he wouldn’t be on patrol for a few days. He didn’t have an exact timeline, but he figured they’d stay anywhere from a few days to a couple of weeks until something more important came along.

Bruce texted back that Tim would always be a priority to him and not to worry. Two minutes later Dick texted too, something about how if Tim was lonely his door was open, and hey he was even coming to Gotham ASAP so *don’t worry* about anything and stop by the manor soon, okay?

Tim cocked his head in confusion. There was no way that was a coincidence. Did Bruce tell Dick that Tim’s parents were back? Why? That was weird. Surely, Tim wasn’t the only one to think that was weird.

He showed Janet the texts and commented how it seemed like Dick and Bruce only communicated with each other when it was about him. She rolled her eyes and said something about silly humans, then went back to tearing her third lobster apart with her bare hands. The Maître d' looked queasy as he belatedly offered her a hammer.

Jack came back from the restroom and asked if anything happened when he was gone. Tim shrugged and changed the topic, done with puzzling over his hoard’s behaviors for the night. They were always freaking out about something, it probably wasn’t important.

His second lobster arrived, and Tim was only a little disappointed that it was cooked before tearing the head off, dipping it in butter, and tossing it into his mouth eyeballs and all.

The other patrons stared, a little disturbed, but it had an excellent crunch.

***

“I’m going out,” Tim yelled, already halfway to the door.

Janet grunted from across the manor and Jack rushed down the stairs to give him a hug goodbye and wish him luck on patrol. Tim put up with it, then sprinted to Wayne manor and down to the Batcave.

“Ugh, that took forever,” he said, waving to Nightwing and Batman as they muttered conspiratorily in the corner. They were doing that a lot these days. “What’s up, guys?”

“Nothing,” Dick-the-worse-liar-Tim-ever-met said. “How’ve you been, Tim? Your parents treating you okay?”

“Uh, yeah, why wouldn’t they be?” he said, slipping into his Robin costume. Jack and Janet had been home a week and so far there were zero injuries. That was very impressive, given that Tim was just starting to hit puberty and was therefore more prone to violence. And while Janet was still on her suppressants, she was always a second away from snapping.

“No reason,” Dick’s voice raised a pitch. “We’re just making conversation.”

“Your conversation skills suck,” Tim replied, bouncing up to the Batcomputer. “Who’re we after tonight?”

“Two Face,” Bruce grunted. “He and the Riddler have taken over the aquarium.”

“Wait, a team-up?” Tim was delighted. “That’s cool! I wonder what they’re planning?”

“Whatever it is, we’re here to stop it,” Dick said, clapping Tim on the back. “You up for some word games, Robin?”

“Am I *ever,* ” he grinned. Tonight was going to be fun.

***

Tim breathed in the smell of chlorine, fish, and bleach, enjoying the way it burned his throat. Ah, bliss.

Gotham’s aquarium was, in Tim’s estimation, a perfect representation of oceanic horror. It captured the grimy, deep sea ship-wreck look perfectly, and many reviewers claimed that they felt the oppressive weight of the ocean bearing down on them as soon as they entered through its salvaged, barnacle-covered doors.

Tonight, its eerie aesthetic was the backdrop for Riddler and Two Face’s dastardly plot. It involved two identical penguins, a bomb, and over twenty clues hidden scavenger hunt style throughout the building. The two crooks were keeping a hostage at gunpoint by the touch pools. Two Face had flipped his coin and decided the Bats had thirty minutes to search the building for clues before he blew them all sky-high, and the hunt was on.

It would have been fun if Tim wasn’t so hungry. That lobster dinner last week had gotten him on a seafood kick, and all these creatures looked delicious.

The fact that they were in tanks didn’t help. In Tim’s head that translated directly to “free food.” When he was a kid Jack had bought a cichlid tank, hoping it would make a good first pet. Both Tim and Janet had snacked on them instead and in less than a day, all the fish had mysteriously disappeared.

Similar results happened with the dog, the cat, and the canaries. Eventually, Jack decided they weren’t a pet family.

Tim’s mouth watered as he ran past row after row of fish. He even missed a couple of clues because he was peckish. Each time he had to restrain himself, he got more hangry.

“I’m going to bash Two Face’s skull in so bad his left side matches his right,” he grumbled as he eyed the stingray exhibit longingly.

Dick shot him a concerned look. “You doing alright?”

“I’m starving,” he grumbled. “I didn’t get to eat dinner before I came here. Mom was in the kitchen.”

When Janet was around sharp objects, Tim stayed clear for both their sakes.

Dick slowed down. “Oh, really? Why didn’t you say anything? We would have gotten you something.”

“Uh, the bomb?” Tim gestured at the aquarium. “Don’t worry, you don’t need to take care of me. I’ll just grab something before we leave.”

Octopus, he was looking at you.

Dick’s face did a wobbly, concerned thing before hardening. “Right. We’ll deal with this later.”

He unholstered his escrima sticks and muttered something about good stress relief.

Tim cocked his head and shrugged. Whatever floated his boat.

***

Turns out, the Riddler and Two Face did not good allies make. Mostly because their styles were so different; Two Face was all about spontaneity and Riddler planned *everything.* The Bats just had to show up and wait for their alliance to fall apart by itself.

As soon as Two Face flipped his coin too many times, he turned on Riddler, who had contingencies of his own, and yadda yadda. Suffice it to say, fighting two rogues who were fighting each other was child's play.

Batman threw Riddler to the ground next to Harvey, shaking his head at how easy the two of them were to catch. A few goons lay sprawled on the ground, and Nightwing was removing the hostage's ropes. All in a night's work. Tim kicked Dent in the shin as he walked over to the touch pools, glad this farce was finally over.

"Laugh it up, Batman," Two Face growled. "We'll be back on the streets before you know it. Wayne didn't pad *every* cell."

"You sound pretty confident for a guy so low on cash you co-oped with a try-hard leprechaun," Nightwing said. "I'll feel threatened when you actually have a bite to go with that bark."

"Enough," Batman growled. "the GPD is on its way. I suggest you two stay quiet. Anything you say can and will be … what was that?"

Everyone paused, straining their ears. The rogues looked hopeful that it was a new criminal element there to offer backup, but the only sound was another loud, wet crunch.

Everyone slowly turned to Tim.

"Robin, what's in your mouth?" Dick asked. He sounded like Jack whenever Janet did something completely normal.

Tim swallowed and held up the rest of the fish he'd grabbed out of the touchpool. The bottom half flopped, nerves still spasming. Blood dribbled onto the floor, a waste of good flavor.

Tim waited a second, but nobody wanted to share, so he stuck the rest in his mouth and swallowed it, tail and all.

“What the hell?” Two Face said. “Was I hit harder than I thought, or did someone bring a canister of fear gas with them?”

“I don’t touch that stuff, so you’re probably concussed,” Riddler said. “. . . I think we’re *all* concussed.”

Tim agreed. Those percussion grenades had been a doozy. Luckily none of the big tanks broke.

He reached in and grabbed another Bamboo shark, but Nightwing shrieked “Stop!” before he could put it in his mouth.

“Did you want some?” Tim asked. “I’ll share.”

The fish flopped desperately in his hand, but Tim kept a firm grip on it. Poor little fishy didn’t understand yet. There was no escape.

“*No,*” Dick said, “I’ll pass. Robin, what are you doing?”

Tim frowned. “I told you, I’m starving.”

He crunched the fish and swallowed. Everyone flinched. Two Face looked weirdly green.

“. . . Robin,” Dick said, sounding like he was having an unpleasant epiphany, “when did you last eat?”

Tim started counting the hours, then shrugged. “Dunno, lost track.”

His body was doing weird stuff right now. Puberty was a jerk, alright. His family had bets on whether he’d need to eat more or would get a slower metabolism like crocodiles and alligators. Right now, he was either gorging himself on excess calories or refusing to eat for days at a time. There was no rhyme or reason to it.

“Bats, where do you *find* these kids?” Riddler asked. “The bendy child and street rat were bad enough, but at least they weren’t taking inspiration from Killer Croc--seriously kid, stop it, I’ll throw up!”

Tim put down the stingray and pouted. Fine, that one looked rubbery anyway. He’d just grab another bamboo shark.

“Are the police here yet?” Two Face said, head between his knees. “I’ll go willingly at this point. I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Same,” Riddler muttered.

“ETA 5 minutes. Robin, I’m going to talk to your parents,” Batman said to Tim.

Tim blinked as he grabbed another fish to munch on. That was a weird non sequitur.

Chapter End Notes

Tim: Hey Batman, how attached are you to your dog?
Bruce: Ace is part of the family, why?
Tim: *sigh* no reason. I'll just find another snack.
Bruce: what?
Tim: what?

Dick: Oh my gosh they're starving him so much he's turned into Golum. Bruce, prepare your lawyers!
Tim *eating another fish*: ????

Lightly Toasted and Somewhat Singed

Chapter Summary

Bruce meets the Drakes. Dick comes for moral support. How good is Janet's human act again?

Chapter Notes

cackles maniacally I love this scene so much. Have fun with the Drakes and Waynes trying to be normal together! *runs away to write more nonsense*

***edited 10/22/23, mostly typos but I added a few lines here and there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Tim and Janet were lounging on opposite ends of the parlor pretending to relax. If either one of them got distracted, the other was ready to whip out their claws and pounce. That being said, when the doorbell rang it distracted *both* of them and they lost their chance for an easy mauling.

Of course, it made sense for them to be equally flabbergasted. *Nobody* came to Drake Manor. The sky was blue, the grass was green, and the Drakes were famous globe trotters with a state-of-the-art security system. People didn't come to their house. It just wasn't done.

"I'll get it," Tim said, throwing his photography book onto the couch.

Janet grunted and turned back to her desk, busy organizing thousands of seed beads into piles based on their shapes. Today was one of her obsessive days. Everything in sight had to be organized or she'd lose it. Tim felt for her on a spiritual level; that was such a mood.

Tim got up and Jack shouted his thanks from the kitchen, where he was getting lunch ready. One of the nice things about dragons was that they preferred raw meat, so prepping their helpings was really quick.

Tim trotted to the front door and glanced through the peephole, expecting a delivery man. Instead, he saw Bruce and Dick on the stoop, dressed in matching turtlenecks.

“Mom, Dad, hoard incoming!” he yelled. There was the clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen as Jack frantically hid the raw stakes he was about the serve.

Tim waited until the worst of it died down, then flung open the door.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “Is there a case? I can get my suit ASAP—”

“No, none of that,” Bruce said amiably. Suspiciously amiably. “I just wanted to check in on you, and maybe talk to your parents. Are they home?”

“Yes, but—”

“Perfect!”

Bruce welcomed himself inside, followed by Dick. Tim blinked, unsure of how they’d squeezed past him, then shrugged.

“Help yourself, then,” he said, leading them to the sitting room. “You can talk to Mom first. Dad is getting lunch ready.”

They nodded, analyzing the house. Tim had seen them do it on cases, but never in civilian mode. Maybe this was a hint for Tim to up his vigilance game?

“What’s the tape for?” Dick asked, pointing at the line on the floor.

“Oh, the left side is mine, the right side is Mom’s,” Tim said. “We’re not allowed in each other’s spaces for safety reasons.”

There, Tim had used the exact wording Jack did when he'd explained how it worked. He'd be so proud that Tim actually paid attention to that lecture.

Dick and Bruce hummed, no doubt impressed by the cleverness of the tape. Tim was proud of his Dad's conflict resolution abilities. It was a feather in his cap that he'd definitely earned, hence why he was known as the peacemaker CEO. After handling two dragons, a company of cutthroat businessmen was nothing.

"Mom, the Waynes are here," Tim said as they entered the parlor. "Dick is the thinner one. Bruce looks like the brick Steph threw at me."

Janet glanced up from her beads, then grunted. "That's accurate. Take a seat, boys."

Dick bit his cheek as he sat, holding back a chuckle. Bruce raised an eyebrow at Tim for some reason.

Tim returned to his side of the room, pulled out his photography book, and flipped back to the skyline he'd been studying. Tim clicked his tongue when she didn't turn around; that would have given him her blind spot.

Janet continued sorting her beads, her posture perfect and her eyes cold. It was very quiet.

Bruce cleared his throat. "You have a lovely home, Mrs. Drake, I don't suppose—"

"It's Janet," she said laconically, "and I know."

Another bead was placed into its pile. It was one of the fused ones that were mutated during manufacturing. Good, best to sort those out of the main group. It would ruin the feng shui.

Bruce's easygoing smile became more strained. Dick looked between Janet and Tim with his police officer face. Tim cocked his head; they really were pulling out all the detective tricks. Was this a test? Maybe he shouldn't be lounging on his side of the room so casually. They might think he was

shirking his training, even though he was actually poised to jump to his feet if Janet moved too quickly.

The silence was broken by Jack running into the room, out of breath and frazzled. He still had his "kiss the cook" apron and orange crocs on.

"I am so sorry," he said, rushing over to the guests. "You caught me at a bad time. Mr. Wayne was it? And Mr. Grayson? It's a pleasure, simply a pleasure. Tim's told us so much about you."

He shook their arms like someone jacking a tire. Bruce and Dick looked surprised.

"I'm Tim's father. Call me Jack," he continued. "Thank you so much for looking after him while we were away. He can be a real troublemaker, I know you've been good for him. Right, sport?"

Tim hummed, leaning away from Jack's hair ruffle. He used the book as a shield, defending his fluffy hair from attack. The tension eased now that he was in the room, blocking Tim from Janet's line of sight.

"What a rascal," Jack chuffed, grinning at the Waynes. "Teens, am I right? Oh, please, stay seated, get comfortable."

Bruce and Dick stared at Jack like he was an alien. Apparently, he was bizarre even for humans. Good to know.

Jack slung his arm over Tim's shoulder, babbling about his and Janet's travels, occasionally asking Bruce something about work. Jack was so eager to socialize that the Waynes barely got a word in edgewise. It was pretty funny.

"—and Janet will eat anything, and I mean *anything* ," Jack said. "I've had to swat her hand away from several fishtanks, you know? She's been great for my sense of adventure, but now and then she still shocks me."

"Yes," Bruce said. He looked pointedly at Tim, "I know the feeling."

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s good to try new things, but one of these days I’m worried she’ll get sick,” Jack said.

Tim glared up at Jack. “Don’t be stupid, Dad. Mom would rather die than that.”

“That’s generally how illnesses work, Tim,” Dick pointed out.

“Don’t patronize me,” Tim said. “That’s what my parents are for.”

They all laughed, except Tim and Janet, who exchanged unimpressed glances. This was why Tim needed his own place. Eighteen couldn’t come soon enough.

“Why don’t you stay for lunch?” Jack said, “I understand if you’ve busy—heaven knows being a CEO eats up a lot of time—but I’d love to get to know you better. Tim positively raves about you.”

“Dad, stop,” Tim said. “You’re being weird. They have better things to do than *socialize*.”

“I’d love to stay for lunch,” Dick said brightly. *Traitor.* “Tim is pretty quiet around us still. I’d love to learn more about your family.”

“You just got to get him going about one of his hobbies, then the hard part is getting him to stop,” Jack said, pullinging Tim to his feet. “Come on you two, food time!”

Both dragons sighed in unison.

“Can’t I eat in my room? Or in town?” Tim said. “I’m good at managing on my own.”

“Yes Jack, can’t Tim go fend for himself?” Janet said. "He's old enough to be responsible for his own meals."

They were both dreading the walk to the dining room.

“Nonsense, this is a family get-together,” Jack said, keeping Tim in place with the arm on his shoulder. “Families spend time together. It’s normal.”

“I wasn’t aware torture was ingrained so heavily into day-to-day life,” Tim muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets. They hadn’t covered this in their last How to be Human class.

“Hey now, it’s not torture. Unless your stomach is acting up again?” Jack said. “Think you can eat today, kiddo?”

Tim cocked his head, sussing out how his stomach felt right now. “I guess I can have a bite. But still, the *dining room?”*

“It’ll be fun, and Mr. Wayne is here, you can sit by him,” Jack offered. “Or Dick, if you’d prefer.”

Tim sighed. Seating wasn’t the issue. It was getting there. “Fine, I guess.”

“Come on Janet,” Jack said. “The food won’t eat itself.”

She sighed and put the last bead down, then swanned to the front of the room. Tim felt Jack’s arm tighten over his shoulder in case he lunged for her.

Tim and Janet’s aggression toward each other was weird. It was instinctual and triggered seemingly at random. Things like scent, proximity, and mood affected it, but sometimes they just got slammed with the overwhelming need to weed out nearby rivals. Having Jack as part of both their hoards was a common trigger, as they wanted to keep him all to themselves, so the man had taken to wearing Kevlar under his clothes at home, and kept a dose of pepper spray on hand to distract them when they started clawing at each other.

This time, there was no incident. They each locked arms with Jack—Tim on the left, Janet on the right, and kept their shared hoard member as a barrier between them as they left the parlor. They both stayed on their side of the tape line and did not make eye contact, although both their faces were locked into unpleasant glowers.

Bruce and Dick followed a few steps behind. Jack kept talking cheerfully about the salad he was experimenting with, his voice filling the entire house.

The tape line continued in the kitchen, slicing the kitchen table in half. Tim and Janet sat across from each other, sitting at the exact same time, and continued glaring at each other. Jack took the head of the table, knowing from experience that it was the only safe option. Bruce and Dick sat on Tim's right, looking more and more perturbed.

The salads were tiny. Jack apologized for not having more, but he hadn't expected guests. Luckily, there were fixings for a charcuterie board in the pantry that he was happy to get out.

"Can you get the anchovies?" Tim asked. "I'm craving fish."

He winked at Bruce and Dick, who went a little green.

"I'll have some too," Janet said. Her fingers tapped impatiently on the table. "And cheese. Pepper Jack and Monterey."

"I want cheese too, Tim countered, "and pickles."

Janet's eyes narrowed. "Well, I want pickles and olives."

"Give me that and the pickled radishes," Tim said.

"Jack, while you're in there, I want the artichoke hearts—"

"And smoked oysters!"

“—be a dear and grab the bacon jam too.”

“Oh, and crackers—”

Jack reappeared and set down a tray piled with half the pantry. “Will that suit your majesties?”

Tim and Janet blinked owlishly, only just realizing how competitive they were getting. Great, microaggressions. Those were the general prelude to a hospital visit. The little things piled up until they lost control and shifted. At this point, they should just get a private surgeon like Bruce, or at least a frequent customer discount.

Both dragons grabbed various jars and started dumping them onto their plates. Tim remembered his manners and offered them to Bruce and Dick, but neither wanted anything. Shame, canned squid was good.

“What did I tell you?” Jack laughed, putting vinaigrette on his normal salad. “ *Adventurous.* ”

“Hardly,” Janet said, mixing apricot jam and anchovies into her lettuce, “we just to actually use our sense of taste. What’s the point of food if it doesn’t have flavor?”

"Or lots of texture," Tim added, sprinkling parmesan on his oysters.

“Don’t mind them,” Jack told the Waynes, “they were raised by animals.”

“You raised me!” Tim said, spitting cracker crumbs everywhere.

“And what a fine job we did,” Jack said sarcastically. “Mr. Wayne, you’re a world traveler too, right? Any hidden gems you’d recommend?”

Tim grumbled under his breath as the conversation steered towards small talk. Janet slid a jar of quail eggs over, and he smiled at her (no teeth) in thanks. She crinkled her eyes back, face otherwise expressionless.

If she was giving him food, then her urge to kill was toning down quickly today. Maybe because Tim's hoard was there to balance things? Tim smiled into his lunch, feeling inexplicably fond.

But he still kept a tight grip on his knife. Just in case.

***

That night, he strolled into the cave to find Dick and Bruce furiously whispering to each other.

"Hey guys," he said. "Did I miss a memo? You're always plotting these days. I'm feeling left out."

"Oh Timmy, we're not trying to exclude you, I promise," Dick said quickly, reaching out for a hug.

Tim stepped back. Emotions, ew.

"Well, what is it then? Another case?" he perked up at the thought. Maybe the Joker finally escaped.

"No, we were just talking about lunch today," Dick said.

Oh.

"Do you normally only get a handful of lettuce?" Dick asked. "I've seen pet turtles get more than that."

Tim blinked. “Dad had to split it five ways, of course there wasn’t much.”

“When he opened the fridge, I saw an entire bag of salad mix,” Bruce said.

“Well, I never said my dad wasn’t an idiot,” Tim said. “Why does this even matter?”

Another weird glance. Tim was really getting sick of those.

“No reason,” Dick said. “We just wanted to make sure you’re eating enough.”

“Well, I am,” Tim said. “I had like, two cans of squid and a jar of peanut butter. It was great, you should try it sometime.”

“Not under this roof, you shan’t,” Alfred said scathingly, giving them their pre-patrol tea. “I have standards for cooking, the culinary sins of my country notwithstanding.”

Tim snorted. He loved Alfred’s sense of humor.

“At least it wasn’t Captain Crunch mixed with coco pebbles,” he replied. “That’s the real war crime if you ask me.”

Dick squawked in defense of his poor life choices, and the evening went back to normal.

For a little while.

***

The next few days were fine, but then the week took a turn for the worse.

“I’m going camping with my family tomorrow,” Tim told Bruce on Thursday. “We’re going to be gone the whole weekend.”

“That sounds fun,” Dick said, inserting himself into the conversation. Tim wondered what the point of moving the Bludhaven was when he was around so often. He practically lived at the manor again.

“Not really,” Tim replied. “I don’t mind roughing it, but Dad makes us do all these awful bonding activities. He says it’s a family tradition, but I think Mom has grounds to divorce him at this point.”

Fishing, swimming, hiking. All great things, except they weren’t allowed to shift into their vastly superior dragon forms to do them. You burn down one cabin and suddenly you have to stay in your two-legged flesh suit. It was the worst.

“I’m sure you’ll have fun,” Dick said gamely.

Tim gave him a soulless, dead-eyed stare. “If I die trying to catch rainbow trout, I’m haunting you, just for suggesting that.”

***

Tim came back to Gotham several days later and only slightly singed.

“What happened?” Bruce asked, wide-eyed, when Tim stormed into the cave with his hair still smoking.

“What *didn’t* happen?” Tim groused, too annoyed to put it into words.

This was the worst camp-out yet. It rained, hailed, had *lightning,* and Jack made them do a nature walk. He’d stepped too close to Tim, causing Janet and Tim to get into a tug of war over him that nearly ripped Jack’s arm off, then later Janet had shoved Tim off a cliff. Luckily, Tim grabbed her ankle on the way down, so they both rolled Princess-Bride style into a ravine, snarling and shifting

into their more deadly forms. Luckily, Jack had brought pepper spray *and* a taser, so he broke up the fight. Unluckily, Tim's sinuses were still blown out and his eyes were red from crying out of the spray. Janet swore her heart was still beating irregularly. It had been a bear taser.

As soon as they'd gotten home, Tim had rolled out of the car and marched straight to the Waynes.

"Can we just go fight some criminals, please?" Tim said when Bruce started to hover worriedly. "I have a lot of natural aggression to get out of my system right now, and I'd rather it not be on the innocent and unsuspecting."

Either Bruce realized Tim wasn't joking or he just grasped at the easy escape from an emotional conversation. Either way, Tim was glad when Bruce fled to the Batmobile and rambled something about a new drug cartel.

This. This was why Bruce was the superior human. He was anti-social enough to be a dragon, but minus all the stabby parts. Tim was so glad he was in his hoard.

He was *so* done with family time. Beating up criminals was much more relaxing.

Chapter End Notes

Dick: So that was weird, right?
Bruce: Which part, the death glares, lunch, tape on the floor, weird taste palettes, or the fact that Jack Drake is somehow more ridiculous than Brucie Wayne?
Dick: ... I came to that house concerned and I left it confused and even more concerned. How is Tim the normal one?

A/N Tim is most certainly not the normal one Dick, get your eyes checked.

Let Sleeping Dragons Lie

Chapter Summary

> Tim: Hey Google, what's the best way to murder your mom?
> Siri: Sir, this is a Wendy's.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Tim had thought the campout was bad, he had no idea what misery was waiting for him afterward. Oh, his innocent past self, not realizing how lucky he had it.

Drake Manor was a war zone. Ever since they'd gotten home from camping, it had been fighting, fire, and fury nonstop. Tim and Janet had to be locked into separate rooms to stop them from attacking each other. Jack had even installed reinforced steel doors in the master bedroom and added extra fire extinguishers to each room. They'd come in handy more than once.

Tim was exhausted from dodging his mother's murder attempts all day. It was a lot to put up with between his own efforts to kill her. They were both getting really creative, not even relying on brute strength at this point. Tim had just ordered a bunch of hydrocarbons, so poison was now in the running. Amazon was truly an amazing place.

But yes, tired. So tired. His bags had bags, and he'd only eaten packaged food for the last four days. Sooner or later, he'd need to get some raw meat (live or otherwise), but couldn't find the time between everything else going on.

He ended up passing out in Wayne Manor's library one afternoon, a copy of *A Taste for Poison* covering his face, dreaming of ripping his mom's throat out so he could finally get a decent night's sleep.

He woke up to Dick hovering over him, about to lay a blanket on top of him.

"Timmy, you doing okay?" Dick asked.

“Why do you always ask me that?” Tim grumbled, blinking the sand out of his eyes.

“Because you look terrible. Worse than usual, even,” Dick said. “Maybe you should stay the night.”

Tim sat up, his hair a fluffball of static. He blinked heavily, feeling slimy and slow from interrupted sleep. It was almost dinner time and after that was patrol. He needed to wake up and get ready… but now that he’d had some shut-eye he desperately wanted more. One night off couldn’t hurt, could it?

“Okay,” he said.

“I mean it. If being in that house is that stressful—wait, what?” Dick’s jaw dropped.

“I said okay,” Tim yawned. “There’s a guest room, right? I’ll stay there. Will Bruce be mad if I skip patrol?”

Dick looked like Tim had been replaced by an alien. “N-No, he’d be thrilled actually.”

“Good, let me just call my parents,” Tim said, fumbling for his phone.

Janet wouldn’t care two bits about this, but Jack was a helicopter parent. He rattled off kidnapping statistics whenever Tim came home late and fussed over every injury he got on patrol. It was super annoying, Tim didn’t know how Janet put up with it 24/7. Maybe that’s why Tim’s main hoard was turning into the Waynes, who were much more low-maintenance (Dick notwithstanding). Jack was more of a secondary member at this point, but he was still family.

He dialed Jack’s cell. It picked up on the first ring and Tim held it away from his ear as his father shouted into the receiver.

“Tim? Tim, why are you calling? Oh my god, are you okay? Where are you? I’m coming *right now.* Do you need medical help? Where’s Janet? Oh my god, I shouldn’t have gone for groceries. Don’t

bleed out Tim, don't go toward the light!"

"Hi to you too, Dad," Tim said, rubbing his face as he woke up more. "What'd you get from the store this time?"

"Ice cream and olives—wait, don't distract me! Do you need an ambulance? What's the last thing you remember? If you were impaled *do not pull the instrument out*."

"I'm not five, I know better than to do that again," Tim grumbled. Dick's head whipped toward him. "Anyway, I'm okay. No medical stuff needed. But I want to stay over with Dick and—"

There was the sound of a car door slamming on the other end. Tim listened to his dad run into their house, shouting for Janet to calm down and stay away from their son. He must have taken the phone away from his ear.

There was a lot of shouting on the other end. A few slammed doors. Lots of colorful language. Tim ran his fingers through his tangles as he waited for Janet to knock sense back into Jack. He got hysterical sometimes. What a goof. Dick looked weirdly pale as he listened in.

"—for God's sake, he's not here," Janet said. "He called you, right? So *talk* to him."

"Oh," Jack said, and it was clear he forgot the phone was still connected to the call. "Tim, I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

"I said I was fine. I want to stay with the Waynes for a bit," he repeated fondly. "If I needed medical help I would've gone to Dr. Thompkin's."

"Right, yes, she doesn't ask questions," Jack muttered. "The Waynes, eh? That sounds nice. Just for the night?"

Janet yelled something in the background.

“Oh, a few days?” Jack said. “That’s smart. Get out of the blast radius.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, just until things cool down,” Tim said. “That camping trip sucked, Dad.”

“Sorry,” he said, sounding truly regretful. “Maybe next year we’ll skip it.”

Tim perked up. That would make all this suffering worth it, hands down. “You mean it? No more camping?”

There was a distant yell of triumph from Janet. Man, they needed to get this violent more often. The results were *amazing.*

“Dad, you just made my year,” Tim gushed. “I love you so much. I’m sending you an imaginary hug right now.”

“Thanks, son,” Jack said, “I’ll talk to your mother. Enjoy your stay with the Waynes, and tell Bruce and Dick I said hi. They’re good chaps, I’m glad they’re in your corner. Love you.”

“Yeah, bye,” Tim said, ending the call.

He got up and stretched, cracking his neck. He grinned at Dick (no teeth), who was staring at him from the couch like Bambi after seeing his mom shot.

“Well, glad that’s over,” Tim said. “Want to play Mario Kart?”

Dick made a strained, inarticulate wheeze in response, which Tim took as a yes.

***

That night, Alfred gave Tim an extra slice of cake for dessert, Dick stayed alarmingly close, and Bruce had that weird, steely glint in his eyes that he usually reserved for rogues. Tim suspected someone had just broken out of Arkham—maybe the Joker? If it was him, Tim was totally going on patrol and "accidentally" firing a grappling hook through his lung.

Apparently, Gotham was quiet as the grave though, so that theory didn't check out. Tim pouted over that and shoved his plate away. The lack of prospective murder killed his appetite, and the Waynes fretted when he didn't eat anymore. Weirdos.

Oh well, that just meant more chances for violence in the future. He'd enjoy his break while it lasted and plot his revenge later.

Over the next few days, he slept almost nonstop. Janet was still too close for comfort (he'd prefer they stay a thousand miles away at a minimum) but the buffer to two estates and Alfred's shotgun did a lot to lower his stress levels. By the time Jack called and said they were traveling to Mongolia for a few weeks, Tim was as right as rain.

He wished his parents good luck on their new adventure over the phone as they boarded their plane, told Janet he wasn't mad about their fighting, just a bit winded by it, and emphasized that there were no hard feelings between them.

Janet said sorry as well. Neither she nor Tim needed an apology, but Jack felt better when they verbalized stuff. Said it was healthy, which was bull if Tim ever heard it, but whatever. Neither dragon took the murder attempts personally, it's just how their family was. Too bad their resident human didn't get it, even after all this time.

The flight attendant interrupted Jack's latest spiel about healthy relationships and told them to put their phones on airplane mode, so Tim chirped a final "love you" and hung up, then bounced down to the kitchen to tell the Waynes his parents were gone again.

For some reason, Bruce, Dick, and Alfred were unhappy when Tim told them the good news.

"Mongolia doesn't have an extraction policy," Bruce muttered into his coffee. Black, no cream or sugar, much like his personality.

“Why does that matter?” Tim asked.

“No reason, Master Tim,” Alfred said, setting a plate of pancakes in front of him. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to stay with us while they’re gone? It would ease all our minds.”

“Ugh, I wish,” he said, “but my dad is super strict about staying at the manor while they’re gone. It’s got great security and he’s always worried I’ll run away. So as long as Mom’s not there I’m safer than a Rolex in a Swiss bank.”

“As long as Janet’s not home, huh?” Dick muttered, stabbing his pancake.

“Yeah,” Tim said, drizzling syrup on his, then topping it off with mustard. “If she had her way, I wouldn’t live there at all. She used to half-joke about leaving me on the street corner.”

Bruce’s knuckles were white around his fork. “Really?”

“Yup,” Tim said. Maybe he should add some ketchup?

“I’m sure she didn’t mean it,” Alfred said dubiously… *was* it dubious, or was that just his accent? “You did say she was joking.”

“Half joking,” Tim said. Yes, ketchup would do perfectly. Maybe some whipped cream too. “I mean, she didn’t even want to keep me when I was born, so the street corner was a real possibility for a while. Moms, right?”

He must have missed a social cue because the conversation died after that. Alfred had his eyes closed, doing those breathing exercises for controlling your temper, and Dick was mutilating his pancakes into mush. Bruce just stared at Drake Manor through the window with something like a promise in his eyes.

Tim shrugged and ate his pancakes, glad things would finally calm down again, and that Alfred finally had toppings he liked.

Chapter End Notes

Dick: Hey Timmy I'm worried you're not safe at your house. Do you want to spend the night —
Tim: sleep over?
Dick: I mean you don't have to but we'd feel much better—
Tim: SLEEP OVER WITH MY HUMANS! *happy squeals*

Also Dick
Dick: and then he said he got impaled—
Bruce *chokes on his tea*

Idiocy is Hereditary

Chapter Summary

Tim: I'm nothing like Jack.

The author: he is, in fact, like Jack.

Chapter Notes

This one's a bit of a shorty! Don't worry though, the next chapter is already written, I just need to proof it. :)

Edited 10/21/23. Typos removed, and a few lines added during Barbara's scene

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Late at night, locked in the safety of his lair room, Tim hunched over his laptop, hidden under a fluffy blanket.

“Almost, almost, allllllmost,” he whispered, fingers dancing over the keyboard.

One backdoor, open. Two firewalls bypassed. One virus sent. Finally, finally he had a way in—

SYSTEM COMPROMISED; AUTOMATIC RESTART IN 5…4…3…2…

“Come on!” Tim shouted as his code was deleted. Oracle’s Arkham program rebooted the entire system and sent a trace back to his computer. Somehow it got through his VPNs *and* reroutes, and wiped his entire hard drive to boot.

It wasn’t his bat-laptop, but still. There went *months* of work.

Tim screamed into his pillow, then chucked the laptop through the window. It lay in pieces on the grass outside, short-circuiting its death rattle as all his hopes and dreams were fried.

It sounded like the Joker's laugh mocking him from a padded cell.

***

The next time he was in Gotham (which was pretty much every night, what the heck), Dick sat down next to Tim in the Batcave and smiled gently.

"You know Tim, there's no shame in admitting things," Dick said. "I won't judge you if there's something you need to get off your chest. You can trust us to take care of you, and to see the sides of yourself that aren't your best. Not everything is your fault or responsibility. "

"Thanks," Tim said, concentrating more on the skateboard he was adding a combustion engine to, "but I can take care of myself. Is that a speech you practice for abuse victims or something? It sounds really rehearsed. You should try for something more organic."

Let's see, if the fuel tank was here…

"Something like that," Nightwing said, breathing deeply. "More organic, huh? Maybe Babs will have better luck than me."

"Yeah, you sound like a self-help manual," Tim said, wondering why Dick was doing Alfred's meditation breaths. "Pass me that wrench?"

***

Barbara was teaching him how to hack, and Tim was living the dream. Human history and stuff? Boring. Learning the fundamentals that would let him break into Arkham and murder the Joker?

Way cool, and Barbara was the best teacher ever. She even called him a natural! Flattery got her everywhere. He loved being appreciated by his hoard.

And she *was* hoard. One of the best parts of his hoard, in fact (just like Dick and Alfred and Bruce and Jack). Tim was so glad he got to know her, he'd never had much luck following Batgirl around with his camera. She was too unpredictable, and then she'd vanished after a while. Tim had been enraged when he found out Joker had taken her legs from her, but he was letting that anger fester alongside his rage over Jason's death for now. It'd be dealt with eventually. He'd repress it until then.

Luckily, he didn't have to repress his confusion, because tonight, instead of going over his coding exercises and showing him how to hack into NASA, Barbara made him read articles from the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

“Is this for victim profiling?” he asked, poking the screen.

“In a manner of speaking,” Barbara said. “You’ll start with that and read the next five on the list.”

Tim groaned. Sure, Bruce made him go over this stuff for his initial bat training, but Robin was more of a “punch the bad guy” sidekick, as opposed to Jason’s “help the victims” operating style. He already had to put up with stupid human social conventions at school, he didn't want to worry about them during his night job. This was as bad as Jack’s How to be Human classes.

“Are you sure we can’t hack NASA?” he said, widening his eyes. Dick said that was an effective way to get what he wanted. “I want to launch a rocket into space.”

“Nice try, but I’m wise to the Bambi eyes,” Barbara said. She didn’t even look at him. “Just read the articles.”

Tim grumbled and turned back to the screen. Honestly, the sacrifices he made for these humans. It wasn’t like he was going to use any of this; if he saw any sad, bruised kids on patrol he’d just get Bruce or Dick and have *them* decide what to do. It was their species, after all, not his. Best leave it to the experts.

Around 2 AM Barbara rolled over and said they were done.

“What did you think, bud?” she asked. “Realize anything from what you read?”

“All the author’s first names started with N,” he said, powering off the PC. “And if you combine their last names it makes an anagram for garlic mushroom soup.”

“I meant about the topics.”

“Oh. Nope.”

“Really?” she said. “Nothing felt… close to home?”

Tim cocked his head, completely lost.

“Why would I think that? Is this a trick question? he asked. Barbara was sneaky like that.

“Apparently,” she grumbled, turning back to her computer. “I can’t believe this. Now I owe Dick money.”

“Why?”

“I lost a bet.”

“Against *Dick?* ” Tim was scandalized. “Is that even possible? You’re supposed to be the smart one!”

“Yes, but I underestimated how much of an oblivious idiot someone else was,” she sniped, wiring Dick fifty bucks. “If they had an actual brain cell, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Tim raised his eyebrows. Barbara thought *everybody* was stupid, but whoever this was must be an absolute moron.

***

More time passed and everything was perfect, but the Waynes were still acting weird.

Case in point, after they got home from patrol in August, Bruce put a hand on Tim's shoulder. Tim flinched on reflex. The only times he got touched were when Dick and Jack hugged him and when he got punched on patrol. (Given that the former two were octopuses that nearly strangled him with each embrace and the latter were outright trying to kill him, Tim wasn't a fan of surprise touches.)

Bruce's face did a weird spasm and he gently let go.

"Tim, I want you to know, things will be okay," he said. "It's going to be hard from here on out. Some things are going to change, but I promise it's for your own good. Whatever happens, it's us trying to help you, alright?"

That was… organic and heartfelt.

"You and Dick have been reading the same self-help books, haven't you?" he said slowly.

Bruce looked guilty. "What— *no* ."

"There's literally a copy of *Dealing with Troubled Youth* in the Batmobile's glovebox," Tim said wryly. "I'm not an idiot, B."

Bruce sighed, looking resigned and weary. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out about this. I swear, we only have good intentions—"

"Relax, I don't mind," Tim said. "You guys are getting much better."

“Better?” B parroted.

“Yeah, I’d give your performance an A+ hands down,” Tim said, readjusting his Robin mask. “It was comforting, gentle, and felt super personal. The kids on patrol will love it.”

“The kids…” Bruce was back to short sentences. Good, brevity was the soul of wit. Or confusion, in this case.

“Yeah, I’m glad you two are taking the initiative to improve your comforting skills,” Tim said. “Dick’s okay at it, but you’re usually pretty bad. Feel free to keep using me as your practice dummy for abuse victims. If you let me know in advance, I can even prepare some trauma responses to act out for you.”

Bruce looked like he’d just swallowed a live scorpion. “I… don’t think that will be necessary.”

“You sure? I bet I could be really convincing,” Tim said, smiling without showing any teeth. “Dad’s always giving me tips on how to hide bruises and stuff.”

The scorpion turned into a rattlesnake. Or something equally weird to slide down a throat. Bruce had his Batman face back on.

“I see. Maybe I should pay your father a visit.”

“He’s in Mongolia, living in a yurt,” Tim said blandly. “You can say hi when I Skype him.”

“Oh no, I think this would need a personal touch,” Bruce said, teeth clenched. “A *firm* personal touch. With my fist.”

Well, color Tim officially lost.

“Is that some male bonding exercise?” he asked. “Will you try to personal touch me with your fist someday? Cuz that sounds weird and I’ll pass, just FYI.”

“I think Master Bruce means to say that he would love a prolonged *conversation* with your parents,” Alfred said evenly. Tim jumped. He hadn’t even noticed the butler arrive. “One I wouldn’t mind overseeing as well, preferably with my shotgun.”

Tim squinted at them, feeling like he was missing something. Alfred nudged him toward the stairs, passing him a cup of Sleepytime tea on the way.

“Off to bed with you now,” the butler said. “Fall semester starts tomorrow. You don’t want to miss your first day.”

“Oh, yeah, I should head home,” Tim yawned. “Early day tomorrow.”

Not that he was looking forward to school. Sleeping through it sounded amazing, except that it'd make Jack upset.

“Nonsense, you’ll say here tonight,” Alfred said. “It’s a Wayne tradition to drive members of the house to school, and I will not be denied that after so long.”

“But I’m not a Wayne,” Tim said.

He swore he heard Bruce mutter “yet” in the corner, but when he looked the man was innocently sipping his licorice tea.

Huh, maybe Tim was more tired than he thought.

“That is a technicality,” Alfred said. “You are Robin, and to me, that means you are a Wayne. Please, do this as a favor for an old man, won’t you master Tim?”

This… was that weird human thing about naps again, wasn't it? Tim did *not* get what the deal was, but it was Alfred asking this time, so…

"I guess one night won't hurt," Tim said, frowning into his teacup, "if the tradition is that important to you."

Both adults visibly relaxed.

"Yes, it is," Alfred said. "Now run along. You need all the rest you can get."

Tim yawned again. "You could say that."

He left them in the cave, washed his teacup, and went to bed, more relaxed as ever.

The manor felt warm and fuzzy, just like his hoard members. It was the best sleep he had in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, the Waynes.

Bruce: Any luck finding out where the Drakes disappeared to?
Barbara: Yep, as soon as they come back "operation save Timmy" is on.
Dick: *readies his escrima sticks*

Draconic Contingency Plans (Non-Violent Edition)

Chapter Summary

In times of test, family is best (Jack please stop buying tickets back to Gotham, we're begging you.)

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be posted yesterday, but I got distracted.

Also, everyone say Happy birthday to my enabler and beta, Ravengranger! She's awesome and deserves all the well wishes. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim went back to his normal routine: school, patrol, homework, weekly skype calls with his parents, etc. he was in his element. Every night he got better at crime fighting and every day he caught up on sleep. Between that, his hacking was getting better than ever, putting him one step closer to completing his vengeance-filled dream as the months passed by.

Meanwhile, Janet was doing an excellent job keeping Jack away from Gotham and Tim was very proud of her. She and Jack stayed in Mongolia for two months doing humanitarian work while networking with local professors. Apparently, there was a university setting up an archeology program and Jack wanted to give them funding, so that ate up his attention for a while.

In September Janet sabotaged their private jet, causing them to crash land in India. It had taken over a month of wandering remote villages and learning the local dialects before they'd found a U.S. embassy to verify their identities. When they finally were able to call Tim, Jack explained he'd had to talk Janet out of hunting several endangered tigers because the "apex predator faced with a challenge" side of her personalty chose the *perfect* time to jump out.

Tim wished he could have been with them for that adventure. The Bengals in Gotham zoo mocked him from inside their cages; so close, yet so far. But it was probably for the best he was in Gotham since Janet probably would have eaten him halfway to Deli. Whatever. He'd just have to go on his own sometime.

Jack had been determined to go home after India, claiming that he'd spoken with several isolationist monks about chakras and spiritual energies and that they'd told him to reevaluate what his priorities in life were. Jack, being the ultimate family man, had taken that to mean he wasn't focused on his family *enough* and needed to help Tim and Janet hug it out once more.

Neither dragon had the mental energy to try and explain *again* why that wouldn't work, it was a terrible idea, and that Jack was reaching rogue levels of insanity by thinking otherwise. Janet had simply taken one for the team and hired Deathstroke to fake kidnap them, then release them onto the Russian plains a week later. Slade Wilson had weirder jobs, Tim was certain, and he knew the hitman could be trusted to do the deed and only the deed, no "extra" ransoms on the side.

(He still sent Slade a fruit basket as a thank you, along with several thousand dollars cash as a bonus. He had no idea how grateful Janet and Tim were, saving them from that vacation from hell.)

By the time Jack and Janet stumbled out of the tundra it was November. Jack called home from a glitchy payphone in Uzbekistan, saying that he was okay and super excited to see his little drake again. Oh, and yes, the family vacation was still on.

Well, not on Tim's watch.

He used his shiny new hacking skills to break into Drake Industries and steal several million dollars, freeze their family accounts, and put the full force of the IRS on the case. Jack and Janet were trapped abroad until it was resolved, which meant Janet could put another scheme in the works. Tim mentally high-fived her in spirit.

The fiasco made national news, which was only blown bigger by the Drake family kidnapping, crashed plane, and various other insane shenanigans from years and years of eccentric world tours. Once the insanity of his parents' travels hit the limelight, there was no shortage of crazy stories about them. All Tim had to do at that point was kick back and watch the show.

Luckily, Tim's odd home life was ignored by the media. Reporters were more interested in his parents' juicer stories, and Bruce's money squashed any articles that might have been published despite that.

"You don't have to go to all that trouble, you know," he told Bruce near Christmas. They were in the Batcave with Dick, going over Scarecrow's files to engineer a new antitoxin for Fear Gas. "If

they wrote about me not having a nanny and called CPS, it wouldn't be a big deal, I know how to take care of it."

Janet had given Tim explicit permission to eat anyone who caused trouble for Jack. Tim was pretty sure reporters were part of that group.

Dick and Bruce got that familiar, pinched look that Tim was a pro at ignoring by now.

"I'm sure you could, but you shouldn't have to," Bruce said at length, inputting a new chemical into their equation. "And anyway, I wanted to do it. Hearing things about family in the paper is… distressing."

Wow, full sentences from Bruce. Maybe Tim should go outside and see if pigs were flying.

"We mean it, Tim," Dick said, smiling sadly. "We want what's best for you, and even if the papers would… simplify a lot of stuff and generate buzz, we'd rather you be happy."

"Well… thanks," Tim said. "I appreciate that. Mom and Dad mean well, but the papers always get it wrong. Dad's been muttering about CPS since I was little and I don't want to deal with that, especially over nothing."

Jack was always freaking out about the newspapers and reporters and other blah blahs. He'd probably have a heart attack if Tim was in an article, just on principle. Please, as if CPS could take Tim and Janet. They wouldn't stand a chance.

"You really love your parents, don't you?" Dick commented. "They don't deserve a sweet kid like you."

Tim scrunched his face. "Family's not about deserving, Dick. You get what you get and do your best with it. That's why it's such a great thing to have when it *does* work out. It means you care enough to make the effort."

Like how Janet fought against her instincts to parent Tim, even though it would have been easier to abandon him as a baby; Jack still insisted on them spending time together, even if it ended in bloodshed more often than not; and Tim staying in Drake manor even though he was old enough to have his own nest because it made Jack happy. The compromises were hard for all of them, but they made the good moments all the sweeter. Despite genetics and the world itself being against them, they were making it work. And that was what was important.

Tim realized he was smiling like a dork and quickly schooled his expression. Good thing Janet wasn't here to see him. He was getting positively sappy.

"You're doing that wrong," he said, swatting Bruce's hand away from the keyboard. "Here, let me."

He covered his embarrassment and typed a different chemical into the formula. When he looked up, Bruce was staring fondly at him, with something soft in his eyes Tim had only ever seen directed at Dick and Jason.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Bruce said. "You just keep surprising me, is all."

Tim shrugged and imputed another compound, cheeks red.

Sappy indeed.

***

The commotion of the missing Drakes, their mangled company, and their apparently Brucie-Wayne level travel shenanigans eventually died down. The Waynes made Tim stay over for the Holidays (even though Tim insisted on going home several nights per week), and New Years came and went without incident. Tim was more and more proud of his family's ability to turn into a monolith even when they were continents apart, united with a common purpose to stay as far apart as possible.

Well, Janet and Tim were the monolith. Jack was obliviously trying to reenact a father's return at the end of a WWII Christmas special, to ill effect. Janet was *very* good at causing distractions.

It was driving the Waynes crazy. As soon as there was a lead on Jack and Janet, they vanished back into the woodwork.

"It doesn't make sense," Tim heard Dick say one night when Tim was sneaking downstairs to grab more tea (he'd gotten hooked on Bruce's licorice flavor), "they're spotted all over the globe with no rhyme or reason. I don't know how they're even getting to these places without a paper trail. What are we missing?"

Probably the fact that Janet was a full-grown Yinlong and when she wanted to fly she flew *fast.* She could cross oceans if she wanted.

(This was a fact she and Tim were *very* careful not to let Jack know. If all it took was making doe eyes at Janet to see Tim, they'd never have any peace. Tim was convinced half the reason Janet stayed human so much was also to downplay her travel abilities. Her sacrifice was appreciated.)

"Don't worry, we'll get them," Bruce said, using his Batman voice. "They won't get away for much longer. Sooner or later they'll have to come back to Gotham."

Tim snorted into his tea and wandered back upstairs. They'd see about *that.*

***

Another couple of months passed, along with some more false leads on Jack and Janet's location, Drake Industries finally getting its hacking problem solved and money returned (thank you IRS), and Batman and Dick being called off-world for a galactic crisis.

Bruce was helping the Justice League punch an alien overlord in the face, Dick was helping the Titans decolonize a planet, and Tim was helping himself to some personal space.

“Are you *sure* you won’t stay in the manor until we get back?” Dick asked anxiously. “We’d be a lot happier if you did.”

Tim frowned. He wanted his hoard to be happy, but he also needed to keep scenting Drake manor. He’d been slacking too much lately, what with Alfred luring him over for food all the time. Plus, the Waynes were doing that thing where they hovered and fretted over him *all the time* . It was endearing up to a certain point, but right now Tim’s independence was rearing its ugly head. It was either stay in Drake manor for a while or pull a Janet and vanish off the face of the earth.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’m coming back for lunch every day to keep Alfred company, and Mom and Dad always call before they come home. I’ll let you guys know when they’re back, I know you’ve missed them.”

The amount of times he’d found Dick and Bruce pouring over world maps looking for his parents was honestly heartwarming. They’d only met once and left such a strong impression! Tim and Janet had totally aced that social interaction. It was a milestone to go down in the scrapbooks, for sure. Jack would be so proud.

Dick nodded, jaw set. “Alright, as long as you let us know if they come back *immediately,* this should be okay. Right, Alfie?”

“Quite right, sirs,” Alfred said. Which, okay, Tim hadn’t been asking for permission, but if they felt better giving it to him he wouldn’t burst his bubble.

He let Dick ruffle his head and wished him good luck saving the universe again, then hopped the fence back to his house and settled in for a relaxing weekend alone.

***

Three days later, Jack and Janet returned.

Chapter End Notes

Author: Choose one, go on a family vacation and keep your fortune, or draw 25 and bankrupt yourselves.
Tim & Janet *lunging for the deck of cards*

BTW Drake Industries is fine. The IRS got them their money back eventually and a corrupt board member was (rightly) charged with embezzlement. Only bad people were harmed in Tim's plot, and on the bright side it worked! No family vacation for him, heehee.

Close Encounters with the Maternal Kind

Chapter Summary

Janet and Drake come home, and Janet is DEFCON 1. Tim would very much like to leave now, thank you.

Chapter Notes

NGL this was my favorite chapter to write ^-^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Tim had to make a comparison, watching Jack and Janet re-enter Drake Manor was like seeing the main couple in Beetlejuice shamble into their home as freshly made ghosts. The look of shock and utter exhaustion was unmistakable even under the layer of grime, mud, and dirt coating them.

The aesthetic was also helped by the fact that it was 2 AM and raining.

“What happened to you?” Tim asked, keeping a healthy distance from Janet. She looked ready to chew on a polar bear for breakfast and follow it up with her son for dessert. That wasn’t a mere facial expression — it was a violent promise to end anyone who came within twenty feet of her mate.

“Another dragon,” Jack said wearily, wiping mud off his glasses with a filthy rag. “Turns out there’s an entire colony of them in Saudi Arabia. Who knew? Certainly not us.”

Janet growled evilly under her breath. Apparently, whichever dragon had targeted them was no longer a problem. Good, Tim wished he could have seen that. Dragon fights were always spectacular and Janet fought dirty. He would know.

“We’ll have to be careful about going to the Middle East in the future,” Jack continued. “Apparently, some of our past digs unburied their gravesites.”

Tim recalled Janet's morbid fascination for finding dragon corpses and nodded. That would probably cause some grudges.

"I'll tell you more about it tomorrow," Jack said, leaning against the wall. "For now, bed and shower. That's all I can handle."

"Sure thing," Tim said. He scurried away as Janet tugged Jack down the hall toward their room, claws still on full display. Her eyes glowed with an eerie light that was usually only there when she was fully transformed.

Tim bet that if he got all the mud off her, there would be a smattering of scales all over her skin as well.

He decided retreat was the best option for now. A big, faraway retreat out of the house. A metal door wouldn't be enough to keep him safe from her tonight.

***

He didn't go to Wayne Manor because that might still be too close. Instead, Tim transformed in the woods on their estate and flew to Delaware. He didn't do long flights often and mainly shifted to his dragon form for health reasons rather than for pleasure, so the trip made his wings ache, but it was worth it.

Nights like this made him consider shifting more often. Grapples were fun and unpredictable but there was something magical about spreading his wings under the stars and feeling the air caress his scales. He felt so at home in this skin, so free.

Granted, he'd feel *more* free if he wasn't running from his mother's protective need to commit filicide, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He landed in a dump and curled up on a moldy mattress, banking on the trash hiding his scent from any potential dragons. Shifting would be a waste of time since he planned to fly home in the morning. This was just a stopgap to give Janet time to rest. The more sleep she got, the more likely she'd be able to resist killing him when he went back.

The smart thing would be to *not* return, but if there was a clan of dragons with a grudge against their family, it was all hands on deck. Tim and Janet couldn't bury their hatchets, but if there was one thing that made them forget their murder attempts, it was a mutual taste for blood and draconic fury directed at their foes. A common enemy did wonders for family unity.

Hm... maybe when this was all over, he'd have Janet help him kill the Joker. That'd be a good bonding activity.

***

Tim texted Jack before flying back in the morning, just in case Janet was in a mood. Jack said to proceed with caution, but please come home. He was rattled by the other dragon and wanted both of his nearby. Fire-breathing security blankets, he called them. Tim rolled his eyes at the nickname but internally loved it.

The next few days were a ceasefire. Tim and Janet were holding onto peace by the skin of their very sharp teeth. Both their fight-or-flight instincts were in overdrive from anticipating a foreign threat, and neither of them was prone to fleeing.

Tim went back to Wayne Manor every day for tea with Alfred. Those peaceful moments gave him the strength to stay civil when Janet snarled at him. If *his* hoard was threatened by another dragon, he'd act much the same. This was just how it went, never mind how much he wanted to claw her eyes out. He could do this.

He was fairly quiet at tea, recharging his battery rather than talking. Alfred filled the silence, sometimes with pointed questions but mostly commentary on the weather. On the third day, he mentioned that Dick and Bruce's thing in space was almost over. They'd be home soon, which made Tim smile.

The peace couldn't last, however, and on day four, it ended with a bang.

Tim couldn't pinpoint exactly what set Janet off. He'd been walking to the kitchen for a snack, bumped into Jack, and then—

Ah, yeah, that'd do it.

Jack's squeak of surprise as they slammed into each other while rounding the same corner would have tripped Janet's fight reflex. Mate in danger? Automatic kill switch.

Tim honestly couldn't remember much of what happened next, but he was amazed that he came out so unscathed.

Not completely, no, but definitely better off than most of their serious spats. He was pretty sure Janet was injured too, given how much blood he was tasting. Although it was probably mostly his.

He knocked on Wayne Manor's door, wrinkling his nose when his hand left blood on the wood. Alfred would hate cleaning that.

The door opened and Dick smiled at him, wearing a ridiculous blue jumpsuit.

"Hey Tim, I just got back, how are— *what happened."*

Tim grinned as best he could, but it was kind of hard, what with the claw marks slashed across half his face and his collarbone. He was pretty sure there was a hole in his cheek.

"Hey Dick, can I borrow your med kit?" he said. "I pissed off my mom."

***

Dick grabbed Tim by the elbow and hauled him inside, slamming the door behind him. He rushed them to the kitchen, yelling at the top of his lungs for Alfred to get the first aid kit. (Kit was putting it lightly. Tim preferred to call it a mini ambulance.)

In less than a minute, Tim was sitting on the kitchen table like a little kid. Dick pressed a cloth to his face, soaking up the excess blood.

“My word,” Alfred said when he arrived, “this was—”

“My mom,” Tim repeated. “It happens. Do you have zip stitches?”

“I’m going to fucking kill her,” Dick hissed, pressing the cloth a little tighter. Tim wriggled but didn’t flinch. “How *dare* she.”

“Hey, don’t be mad,” Tim said. “I told you, it happens.”

Alfred slammed the box on the table. “I’m calling master Bruce.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Dick said tightly. “This will be a team effort. Hold still Tim, I’m going to disinfect it. It’ll hurt.”

“Won’t hurt more than this, “Tim snorted. Oh whoops, hole in his face. Ow ow ow. How was his jaw even still connected?

Alfred returned a moment later, putting his cell phone in his pocket. “He’s on his way. ETA five minutes.”

Dick finished disinfecting Tim’s cuts.

“I thought he was still in space,” Tim said, kicking his feet as Dick got the needle ready.

“This takes priority,” Dick said. “Why didn’t you tell us your parents were back? You promised.”

“I thought I did,” Tim said, glancing at Alfred. “Didn’t I mention it at tea?”

“You most certainly did not,” the butler replied.

Tim blinked. “Oh. Well, they’ve been back for four days.”

Dick pulled the stitches a lot harder than Tim was expecting. He couldn’t bite back his yelp.

“Sorry, sorry,” Dick said, lips pursed. “I promise that wasn’t on purpose. Four days?”

Tim did jazz hands since his cheek was getting sewn back together. There was probably going to be a big surgery in his future, otherwise he’d have scars. Jack would have to set that up. He knew a lot of good surgeons, given how much Tim and Janet tore into each other. It was a miracle there wasn’t *more* evidence of their fights.

Dick tied off the last stitch and sat back. His hands were shaking slightly.

“They’ve only been here four days and they did *this* to you,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, good self-control, right?” Tim said, nudging Dick with his foot. “I’m proud of her. I thought she’d attack me the night they got back. That’s why I had to sleep in the dump.”

Dick’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates. “The what—”

Then the door slammed open. Bruce stood in the frame, staring in horror at Tim’s face.

Tim waved cheerfully. “Hi B!”

His grin was, unfortunately, undercut by the mutilating gouges ribbed with new stitches that stretched across his skin. Smiling probably only made them look worse.

“Aflred,” Bruce said, eerily calm, "get the shotgun.”

Chapter End Notes

At the Watchtower:
Hal: Hey, where did Batman go?
Flash *eating nachos*: IDK, he said something about homicide.
Hal: Ah, stopping another murder. Classic Bats.
Flash: No, I'm pretty sure he's going to kill someone. Like, for real.
Hal:
Hal: what
Flash: pass me the cheese sauce?

Five Feet and Lethal

Chapter Summary

Behold, what you've all been waiting for!

Chapter Notes

Ravengranger seriously is the best beta-ever. I learn so much about grammar from her. Hail Ravengranger, long may she edit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim *may* have misunderstood a few things about the Waynes. Namely, what all their pointed questions about his home life were about and why they'd suddenly become interested in using him as a fake abuse victim for their roleplay exercises.

Well, too late now. He had other problems to deal with than him apparently inheriting Jack-levels of obliviousness.

"You can't face off with my mom, she'll bite your head off," he insisted, grabbing Bruce by the elbow and trying to yank him to a stop.

Bruce kept walking, dragging Tim behind him like a cartoon character.

"Come on B, it's not a big deal!" he insisted."I gave as good as I got!"

"I don't doubt it, but just in case, I'm going to even the scales," Bruce said.

He was wearing his Batman under armor (sans mask) and had two nasty knuckle dusters ready for blood. Dick had violence in his eyes, a pair of handcuffs, and his escrima sticks. Alfred had his shotgun.

Alfred was the one Tim was most worried about.

“We’ve let this go on far too long,” Dick said. “CPS should have been called on day one.”

“Agreed,” Bruce grunted.

“For the last time,” Tim said as the group crossed onto the Drake’s property, “I’m not an abuse victim! This is just how we roll. We have a system, I always go to the doctor, it’s *fine.* You’re overreacting —”

None of these things seemed to matter to the Waynes. Tim was starting to go from panicked to annoyed. Humans. Stupid humans and their emotions always getting in the way. If they just *listened* -—

Bruce pounded on Tim’s front door so hard he left dents.

Angry yelling, hissing, and breaking glass echoed from the other side.

Crap. Crap crap crap. Jack hadn’t been able to calm her down.

“I mean it, you have to leave *now,*” Tim said, trying to push Bruce back toward the steps. “You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“On the contrary, young sir,” Alfred said, checking to make sure the gun was loaded, “we know exactly what is happening.”

But that was the thing, *they didn’t* , and to make matters worse, Jack chose that moment to answer the door, his eyes wild and hair smoldering. Tim decided that from now on his father was solely responsible for every bad thing that happened in his life. Curse this man and his sperm, Tim could’ve been happily nonexistent if it weren’t for him!

“Mr. Wayne, I’m sorry this isn’t a good —” Jack’s eyes glossed over the angry neighbors ready to lynch someone and went straight to his mangled son. “Timmy! Oh thank goodness, it’s nothing serious.”

Tim gave a double thumbs up. No organs or bones were damaged this time. That was one less thing for Dad to worry about.

“Not serious?” Dick growled.

Bruce bypassed the posturing and plowed through the door, grabbing Jack by the collar, looking absolutely murderous. Crap. Crap crap crap.

Tim scrambled inside after the group, trying to find a way to fix this.

“I’ve seen a lot of low things in my life, but this makes my blood boil,” Bruce barked, pinning Jack against the wall. “You and your wife are going to pay for hurting Tim. I’ve seen the medical records. Every time you’re in town, he’s sent to the emergency room. It ends now.”

“Please, you don’t understand,” Jack said, hands in the air and panicking. “You have to leave before she notices. She’s in a mood.”

“I don’t care how she’s feeling. No emotion justifies this,” Bruce said, but Tim tuned the rest out.

Dad was right. This was bad. So much worse than Tim had originally thought.

It was two dragons’ hoards in the same room threatening one another. Right. In front. Of the dragons.

The hairs on Tim’s arms stood on end. He instinctively bared his teeth, straining his ears for Janet’s distinctive growl.

It was deadly quiet. He could’ve heard a pin drop.

“You need to leave, please,” Jack said. “We can work something out, whatever you want, but not here and not now. You’re all in danger.”

“The only one I see in danger is you, bucko,” Dick said, his finger straying toward the electric switch on his escrima stick.

There was the nearby scrape of scales on tile and the taste of ashes on his tongue. Timothy growled, hackles rising.

“Tim, no,” Jack barked, recognizing the challenge. “Down.”

“Don’t talk to him like that, he’s not an animal,” Bruce snapped.

“Timothy, I mean it,” Jack said again, ignoring B. “*Stay calm.”*

Tim flexed his fingers and felt fire smolder in his throat. Usually, he deferred to Jack, but not this time. Not when his hoard was in danger.

A returning growl answered his challenge, and the pale light of Janet’s eyes flashed from the shadows of the hallway, glowing like an anglerfish’s lure.

When she prowled closer, Tim got a look at her condition. Her left shoulder was mauled from their earlier struggle, and the side of her neck was punctured with jagged bite marks. So he *had* gotten her. Good.

Humanity was a skin they wore for Jack’s sake — a mask they made fit by trial and error (so much error), but it *never* replaced what lay underneath. Now Janet’s facade was slipping, revealing the cold, unending fury of the monster that lurked underneath.

“Hells bells,” Dick muttered in horror. “Mrs. Drake, what happened to you?”

Dick's voice caused her to take her eyes off Tim. Janet tensed further as she saw her mate pinned to the wall and surrounded by humans with weapons.

"Darling, son, please calm —" Jack continued, but his opinion was officially irrelevant. This was about hoards now, not family, and one was clearly more important than the other.

Janet shifted. Skin bubbled; facial bones elongated; scales sprouted. Her jaw dislocated, revealing dozens of rows of ivory fangs unsheathing from her gums, each one jagged and dripping with venom. Tim knew from experience that one bite could tear an animal in half.

And she was aiming them at *his* hoard. *His* people. *His* Waynes.

Tim peeled back his lips in a snarl to match his mother's, flexing his fingers into long, black claws as he let his own features shift.

"What in the world —" Alfred muttered in horror.

Tim heard the shotgun's safety click off.

Both dragons *snapped.*

***

The thing about dragons was that they were largely unemotional. Tim could count the number of times he cried on one hand. He didn't get the fuss about morals, laws, or feelings. But there was an exception to that, and Janet potentially hurting the Waynes took the dial up to eleven and then broke the knob.

Anger? Who was she? This was pure, unadulterated fury fueled by an inferno of protective rage.

Janet lunged through the air like a tiger, aiming for the nearest Wayne. Alfred raised his gun, but Tim was faster. He slammed into his mother, sending them both crashing into the foyer wall.

Plaster, drywall, and a landscape painting came crashing down over them like apocalyptic snow.

She contorted to her feet, spine bending further than even Dick's could, and tried to tear out his throat. Tim kicked her off balance and tackled her back into the hallway and away from his hoard. His new stitches popped as his own jaw dislocated to make room for his fangs.

Out of the corner of his eye Tim saw Alfred aim the shotgun at Janet, face steely with a soldier's professionalism. Dick and Bruce were slightly slower on the uptake, staring at Tim in horror for some reason. Jack took advantage of their surprise to kick the Dark Knight in the balls and throw himself at the butler.

"Oh no you don't," he shouted. "Nobody shoots my wife!'

He grabbed the gun and pointed it toward the ceiling just as it went off. The round lodged itself in the plaster rather than in anyone's chest cavity. Tim didn't see what happened after that. He was too busy chasing Janet deeper into Drake manor.

They clashed in the parlor, halfway shifted and leaping over couches and aiming for the throat. Their scales deflected most of the damage from their fire and venom, but one good chomp and they'd be out of commission. Crocodiles had nothing on their bite force; dragons could chew through *steel.*

Janet was determined to target the Waynes, using every dirty trick in the book to get back to the hallway. She tried to bite Tim's head off, flung him into the curtains (then set them on fire), and tried to crush him with her rapidly increasing weight.

Tim barely dodged the attacks, countering with lunges for her throat and legs. He was smaller and faster than Janet, even when only partially transformed, and he took advantage of that to swipe at her eyes. It was nothing personal, his mother just really needed to die.

People were yelling behind him (*his people*), and Tim let his draconic form slip out more, using his tail to swipe several heirloom urns into Janet's face to distract her from them. They shattered ceramic barely fazed her, but at least they kept her focus on him.

Tim knew he had to keep her busy if he wanted to win. Janet was a nightmare to fight; she had decades of experience on him, jaws so strong that they shattered her own teeth, and a hunting strategy similar to anacondas. When she was fully transformed, Janet's sinuous body was over sixty feet long, and her favorite method of slaughter was to wrap herself around a victim and squeeze until they were crushed.

Luckily, Tim's smaller size and sharper claws gave him the advantage indoors. He just had to make sure she didn't grow to full size.

He managed to land a solid hit to her injured shoulder, deepening an already bad wound. Janet shrieked in pain as Tim sank his teeth into her crest, tasting the coppery tang of victory. *He had her.*

But then Bruce appeared in the doorway, a new bruise on his jaw and Batman's seriousness in his eyes. He ran straight for them, yelling Tim's name like the brave, *stupid* hoard member he was.

Janet saw her moment. Her entire form wavered and expanded as she shifted her weight and spun. Tim clamped his jaw down, but the centrifuge flung him off her, leaving only deep gouges behind as her body gained mass and lethalness at an exponential rate.

Tim hit the fireplace so hard the marble cracked, but he ignored the pain (and the way his eyes fuzzed from the impact) and leapt at where he *knew* Janet was aiming.

Right into Bruce.

The Dark Knight wheezed as the wind was knocked out of him, but Tim was sure he'd thank him later, seeing as how Tim's tackle was the only reason he hadn't had his head ripped off by Janet as she'd pounced.

He curled over his favorite hoard member, growling protectively as he stared down his mother. Janet clung to the wall, using her claws to stay suspended above the ground. The decorative pillar buckled dangerously.

Around them, the parlor was burning, someone in the hall was screaming, and one of the walls had caved in.

Janet spat out two broken fangs, new ones already sliding into place, and hissed metallically. She sounded like steam screeching through a pipe. Tim replied in kind, letting his horns grow another few inches.

Both dragons regarded each other for a split second, calculating their odds. The playing field was as even as it was going to be, but the stakes had never been higher.

In all their fights, Janet and Tim had danced the line of grievous injuries out of respect for Jack. They were experts countering the other, honed after years fighting the same opponent; now it was time to see who would finally come out on top.

Fifty-fifty was pretty good odds, as far as Tim was concerned. He'd worked with less. He could do this, even if winning would come at a high cost.

Their stalemate only lasted a second, then Tim lunged for Janet. He planned to sacrifice an arm for a clear shot at her jugular.

She responded in kind, jumping off the wall claws first. Her open maw was dripping with molten fire.

Before they collided, something got in the way. Tim quickly retracted his claws as Jack darted between them in all his soot-stained glory. Crap crap crap stupid Dad what was he —

He was holding Dick's escrima sticks aloft like an aircraft marshaller. The electricity was turned on.

Oh *no.*

He and Janet were on a collision course. There was no stopping, no time to dodge, no *nothing.* Both dragons slammed into each other, too distracted from trying not to hurt Jack to kill each other and too late to get away from the vigilante tasers, and got *zapped.*

Tim shrieked as electricity flooded his senses, and he crashed onto the Persian rug. He spasmed on the ground, skin writhing from electrical discharge. He reverted back to human form, hoping that would help, but only twitched helplessly as he lay paralyzed.

Janet groaned beside him in a similar position. Six thousand volts would do that. Looks like their duel to the death was over for now. This was just like their last campout. Ow. Ow ow ow.

Both of them looked at their hoard member in betrayal.

“Daaad, come on, I a-almost had her,” Tim whined.

“Not…fair,” Janet wheezed.

“No, you know what’s not fair? Trying to kill each other again!” he said, hands on his hips. “What have I said about homicide?”

“W-We have our r-reasons —” Tim stuttered. Woah, talking was hard when he was a live wire. He needed to talk to Dick about lowering the settings on his weapons. This was worse than the bear taser.

Bruce got up from the floor. Ash and plaster coated his hair. Dick and Alfred appeared seconds later in the doorway. Dick was walking with a visible limp. All the Waynes looked wide-eyed at the scene.

“I can’t *believe* you two,” Jack continued, dropping one of the escrima sticks. “It’s the first time we’ve been home in months, and all you can think about is killing each other?”

He sank to his knees, actual tears in his eyes.

“Why do you do this *every time* ?!” he demanded. “All I want is to spend time with my wife and son without them tearing each other’s throats out, is that too much to ask?”

Janet and Tim exchanged panicked looks. Fourteen years of patient parenting and Jack was finally having a breakdown. This was the ultimate worst-case scenario. Tim silently pleaded for Janet to find her second wind and kill him before he had to attempt to comfort the man.

Alas, Janet was eyeing him the same way, but they were too shocked to even move. The universe was cruel.

“There…there?” Janet said, wincing at her own words.

“Um, que será será?” Tim offered. Nope, even in another language, he was equally useless. Whoever said platitudes helped was a dirty liar.

Jack hiccuped into his hands, seconds away from outright bawling.

Bruce stepped gingerly forward, coughing as he breathed in fumes from the fire. Several oil paintings were burning, and they made a lot of smoke. His shoes crunched on broken glass and pottery, distracting Jack from his feelings.

“I think we need some explanations,” Bruce said. He gestured to the destroyed parlor, the fire everywhere, and Janet and Tim on the ground. They were mostly human again, but Tim’s tail was still there and Janet’s horns hadn’t retracted. Oh, and they both were covered with scales.

Jack gathered himself and got back up, straightening his tie with bone-deep weariness. “Oh, right, of course. Sorry about that. I guess I should’ve mentioned this earlier, but Tim and Janet are dragons. Surprise.”

The wall behind them finally buckled, crashing to the floor in a cascade of debris and leaving dust particles in its place. The Waynes' faces seemed weirdly shell-shocked, like they'd also been bashed repeatedly by a high-speed flying reptile until their mental drywall had shattered, and Tim wondered what the heck had them so surprised.

It wasn’t like he was *hiding* this, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Rewind to what went down in the foyer while Tim was repeatedly slamming Janet's head into the wall and screaming bloody murder.

Alfred *attempts to shoot the Momzilla attacking his unofficial grandson*
Jack *channels his inner MMA fighter to incapacitate Bruce and divert the shot*
Bruce *runs after his precious lil bean Timmy to save him from whatever monster is possessing his mother*
Dick *tries to get Jack in a headlock*: Okay man, be cool, there's a monster posing as your wife but be cool
Jack: My wife isn't a monster, you take that back! *grabs Alfred's shotgun and whacks Dick's knee with it so hard the poor vigilante is transported to a new realm of pain, then grabs the escrima sticks and runs from the room to stop yet another death match between his wife and teenage son. You know, a normal Tuesday for him*
Alfred: Hm, my gun has jammed. Well, I suppose I'll simply have to use my revolver. Would you like me to carry you back to the fight, Master Dick.
Dick: Yes please. Did a peace-loving CEO seriously just beat me?
Alfred: indeed sir, although I think the biggest blow was to your pride.
Dick: You can say that again. Ow.

Is Jack actually pretty strong under that dad bod and goofy exterior? My friends, he regularly inserts himself in draconic cage matches and comes out on top. The man is buff.

House of Dragons

Chapter Summary

After that rather explosive reveal, it's time for answers.

Chapter Notes

Hi, I'm back!

I was honestly so blown away by the response to this fic that I freaked out, hid under a rock, and obsessively rewrote and edited this chapter twenty billion times out of worry it wouldn't match up to the rest. Luckily, RavenGranger fed me graham crackers and compliments and helped beta it like the saint she is, which is why (weeks later) I can post this behemoth and get started on the next few arcs of this fic.

Thanks for reading everyone! You're the best! ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim wanted it on the record that none of this was his fault. The Waynes were idiots, Janet started the fight, and Drake manor needed to be renovated anyway. He was blameless. *Blameless,* and if everyone would stop fussing over him that would be great. Janet was down and this was his only chance to worm over to her and finish the job before she got control of her limbs.

But no, Dick wanted to give him medical attention instead and Jack was insisting on putting out the fires. But come on, the manor was barely damaged and Tim was fine. Somehow, against all odds and intents, he and Janet had both come out of the fight with all their limbs, squishy parts, and orifices intact. The hole in his cheek didn't count; it was superficial and barely needed stitches. (Fourteen was barely, right?)

"Tim, seriously, stop wiggling," Dick said wearily, "it's hard to do stitches when you're moving like this."

"I juwth neef fife minfutes," he said, talking around the needle. "Brb."

“You’ll stay where you are, young man,” Alfred said as he swept up bits of pottery, “there has already been quite enough excitement for one day.”

Bruce threw an empty fire extinguisher onto the growing pile and nodded in agreement. Jack had had the foresight to put fifteen of them and a med kit under one of the couches. It made cleanup really easy.

(Tim was glad his dad’s investment in them was put to good use. The saleslady had been dubious they’d even get through them all, but at this rate it wouldn’t be long before they had to buy another set in bulk. Take that Karen, Jack knew exactly how many canisters they needed per room. She could stuff her judgemental attitude up her 80's hairdo. Ha!)

“But ah gotta kill my ‘om,” he said, pointing at Janet with a chipped claw, “She’s easy pickings!”

“There is no homicide allowed in this house,” Jack said sternly as he patched up Janet’s shoulder. “We’ve talked about this, Tim. You too, Janet.”

Dick finished restitching Tim’s cheek and took the needle out. Tim sighed in relief, grateful to finally talk normally again.

“But Dad, all the other dragons are doing it,” he whined. “It’s tradition. You’re keeping me from my heritage.”

“It is very unfair,” Janet said primly. “After all we’ve done for you we deserve a few creature comforts.”

“Murder is not a comfort,” Jack said blandly, “and I like my family in one piece.”

“Lame,” Tim grumbled. “You always say that.”

He and Janet huffed in tandem. This was the first *serious* grudge match they’d had and Jack had to butt in on it. Tim knew he would have won too. So what if he lost a limb? It would have been worth it.

“This will scar you if you don’t get surgery soon,” Dick murmured, looking sadly at Tim’s face. “Yours too, Mrs. Drake.”

“I don’t care,” Janet said as Jack tied off the bandage. “Wounds are badges of honor.”

“Yeah, what she said, scars are badass,” Tim parroted as Dick dabbed disinfectant on his arms, “Mom is right about everything.”

“Please don’t use her as a role model,” Bruce said. “She tried to kill you twice today.”

“I know. She’s awesome.”

Tim reached over to give Janet a high five and she reflexively tried to bite his fingers off. Her teeth snapped on air as Jack casually yanked her back by her braid.

"Bad dragon, don't bite your child," he said absently, then rolled his eyes at the Waynes in exasperation. “Sorry, she’s in one of her moods.”

The Waynes shared a long, incredulous look. Tim felt for them. Jack tended to have that effect on people.

“I… sure. I believe we asked for explanations?” Bruce said. He had a constipated look on his face.

“Of course, of course,” Jack said, gesturing toward the wrecked sofas. “I’ll explain everything. But, oh, where to start?”

“How about your internship in college?” Tim suggested as Bruce picked him up.

Tim blinked, finding himself suddenly on the couch across from his parents, tucked into Bruce’s side with an arm wrapped protectively around his shoulder. Dick squeezed next to Tim’s other side.

Alfred stood behind the couch, using his shotgun as a cane.

Tim looked smugly at his mom. Weren't his hoard members great? They knew exactly where they belonged. He'd trained them well.

Aside from not knowing a thing about dragons anyway, but that was hardly *Tim's* fault.

“Great idea, Tim,” Jack said, smiling at all the Waynes. “Yes, that’s a great place to begin. You see, I’d just finished my undergraduate degree at Cornell, and…”

Tim settled onto one of the couches and prepared himself for a long storytime. Janet flopped onto the ground by Jack, equally resigned. When Jack got going he never stopped talking. Tim had heard their meet-cute so many times he had the whole thing memorized.

Oh well. At least Jack wasn’t crying anymore. Tim would take his wins where he could get them.

***

“Wait, you’re telling me you rom-commed your way into marrying a mythical creature and somehow got a kid out of it?” Dick said ten minutes later with the weariness of a man done with reality.

"Oh yes. Meeting Janet really was the best thing to ever happen to me," Jack continued. He gave his wife a disgustingly affectionate look. "Sure, there have been some cultural misunderstandings and adjustments for both of us, but she and Tim are absolute angels. They're both my treasures."

Janet yawned, revealing her endless maw of teeth dripping with venom.

“Angels, of course,” Alfred said dryly. “I suppose you mean in a Biblical sense.”

Tim snickered, but Dick still seemed to be processing everything.

“Dragons,” he repeated, staring at Tim and Janet. *“Dragons.”*

“Yes, they’re actually very lovable,” Jack said, as if that was an adjective Tim and Janet *liked* having applied to them, “the last week has just been a bit rough for both of them… Are you feeling alright?”

“Never been better,” Dick said, “I just need to sit down.”

“You *are* sitting down,” Tim told him.

Dick didn’t seem to be listening. “I can't believe this… you seriously married a dragon.”

“Why are you so hung up on this?” Tim asked. "You dated an alien."

"Kori never tried to eat me or anyone else," Dick said bluntly. "I just want to know why your dad thought marrying a giant lizard was a good idea,"

"Because of love!" Jack said passionately. “Love makes everything worth it!”

Everything except those lousy camping trips. Tim loved his family just fine without having to suffer through those, thank you.

"I’m sure love is great, but it doesn’t fix biology," Bruce said with his usual tact. "There’s no record of dragons shapeshifting. This shouldn’t be possible.”

He gestured at Tim and Janet, who were kicking each other under the coffee table.

"Magic artifact," Jack said simply. "It broke after I used it, but it's been the gift that keeps on giving. I'm fairly certain it's the only reason Tim could be born. He’s a hybrid that inherited Janet’s

shapeshifting, although it took him a few years to master it. I'll have to pull out the photo albums. He was adorable… in an eldritch horror sort of way."

Dick made a cooing sound and Bruce perked up (while pretending he wasn't interested). Tim wondered why humans were so obsessed with protecting smaller versions of themselves. Those instincts were so weird. Children were for eating, not coddling.

“You should have seen him as a toddler,” Jack continued, “always prowling around trying to catch mice. He used to leave the dead ones for me as presents. I think I still have a few that I taxidermied lying around—”

Alfred coughed politely and raised an eyebrow. Jack smiled awkwardly and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Pardon me,” he said. “There aren’t a lot of people I can gush to about this. Anyway, as you can imagine Tim was unexpected. As I said, he’s a hybrid, although his dragon side seems more dominant. Their powers are why we’re able to masquerade as a normal family despite a few… cultural differences we’re still working on.”

“He won’t let me eat people, even the annoying ones,” Janet grumbled. “It’s unfair.”

“Yeah, I want to eat people too,” Tim replied. “They look tender.”

“The long pig,” Janet said wistfully.

Both dragons sighed longingly.

“No murder. We are not a cannibalistic household.” Jack reminded them.

“It’s not cannibalism if we’re not human,” Tim argued. “Besides, it’s tradition.”

"Happy families don't eat their young," Jack said out of habit. "We've talked about this."

"Nonsense, happy families kill people all the time," Janet said, "mine always did."

"Yeah, survival of the fittest!" Tim said. Mom knew what was up.

Jack got out a spray bottle and squirted them. They hissed loudly in disgust.

“As you can see,” Jack told the Waynes, ignoring the reptilian noises and fake death rattles, “humanizing them is still a work in progress, but they’re getting better.”

The Waynes stared at Janet and Tim, expressions blank. Alfred at least seemed to be taking it in stride, although it was hard to tell with his poker face.

After about a minute, Bruce spoke slowly.

“At least this explains the aquarium,” he said.

“Yeah,” Dick nodded. “I was wondering how he bit through the bones like that.”

Jack gasped. “He got into the fish again? *Timothy Jackson Drake,* you know better than to eat pets.”

“Aquarium fish are public property and I’m part of the public,” Tim defended. “I did nothing wrong.”

“He’s right, they were going to die anyway, it might as well have been a proper slaughter,” Janet said, because she was wise and mature, unlike some people.

They got sprayed with the bottle again. Gross. Tim almost missed the taser.

“I’m sorry about them,” Jack sighed, collapsing against the back of the sofa. "I’ve been doing my best, but dragons just aren’t meant to share personal space. I’d hoped easing them into more one on one time would counteract their natural aggression, but whenever we leave Gotham it’s almost impossible to get back and that resets their tolerance levels. I have no idea why coming home is such a nightmare.”

“Yeah, weird,” Tim said. Janet hummed neutrally, the picture of innocence.

Bruce, Dick, and Alfred narrowed their eyes in sync. Tim suspected there would be a post-interrogation interrogation to talk about the travel delays later. Great.

Bruce coughed and moved the conversation on, thankfully. “So, their injuries. Whenever you come home…?”

“They fight. *All the time."* Jack said, running a hand through his hair. “It was alright when Tim was little. Dragons don’t even raise their kids, but Janet said she’d make an effort. And it was going well! No bites or scratches or anything.”

Well mostly. Tim had chewed on a lot of furniture back then. And small animals. And preschoolers. He’d come a long way since.

“Obviously, that didn’t last,” Dick said, doing the math on his fingers. “The hospital records start when he was six.”

“Yes,” Jack glowered at Janet, “apparently there’s only so much time before a dragon registers another one of their kind as a threat, no matter how tiny and cute they are.”

“Timothy was never cute, he’s a dragon,” Janet said scathingly. “Don’t degrade his value with your petty human descriptors. He is a fierce killing machine and the ideal child.”

“Yeah, you tell him, Mom!” Tim cheered. “Dragon solidarity!”

She kicked his foot again. He kicked back and hissed aggressively.

“Please play nice,” Jack said, as if that wasn’t exactly what they were doing.

Tim stuck his tongue out at his dad and continued trying to stomp on Janet’s feet. Soon he’d get his mobility back and then she’d *really* feel his wrath.

Everybody watched them for a minute before turning back to the conversation and ignoring their battle the same way that Tim ignored his teachers at school.

“As I was saying, we tried everything,” Jack continued, “meditation, anger management, chew toys, hormone suppressors for Jan, you name it. I found so much inner peace that I’m not sure how I didn’t ascend straight to Nirvana. My hypothesis is that these two stress out me too much to reach enlightenment.”

Well, it was as good a theory as any. Jack had a lot of gray hair and at least half of it was Tim’s fault.

“Janet finally suggested we give Tim space to grow and that’s how our travels began. They both insisted he was fine without supervision, which I’m still uncomfortable with, but since we had to keep this a secret…”

He gestured at their currently half-dragon bodies. Turning all the way back was too much of a (literal) pain right now. Tim would get around to it when he didn’t feel like Wily Coyote on the wrong end of a telephone pole.

“It seems the situation wasn’t as clear cut as we assumed,” Alfred said, still looking like he was judging Jack very harshly, but was maybe less willing to pull out the shotgun.

“No, it wasn’t,” Jack said. “I thought about boarding school or a live-in groundskeeper or anything aside from leaving him completely alone, but Tim has to transform every so often, and having a stranger nearby worries me. Metas go for a fortune on the black market. I don’t want to know how much a shapeshifting dragon would fetch.”

The Waynes grimaced. There was a recent trafficking case where a set of triplets had been auctioned off for their invisibility powers. They'd each gone for over a million dollars.

"I'm still shocked you left him to his own devices," Alfred said, "if separating the two of them was the only option, why not simply send Janet away?"

Janet's growl was gravelier than Batman's. Smoke rolled out of her mouth as her teeth rearranged again, eyes glowing with anger at the mere suggestion she separate from Jack. The butler subtly checked the safety of his shotgun as she glared at him. Tim hissed a warning at her, his own fangs descending. That was his emotional support butler. No touchy!

"I think I see the problem," Bruce said, eyeing the venom that dripped from her fangs. It fizzled on the floor. Tendrils of smoke rose from where it fell, threatening to reignite the carpet fire.

Jack made a 'there you go' gesture and nodded. "Dragons don't make attachments easily, but when they do they're extremely dedicated. I'm in both their hoards, so as you can imagine it's been tense."

Tense was putting it mildly. There was an actual tallyboard of murder attempts in the kitchen and it was over triple digits.

"Hoard, like a collection?" Dick said, visibly forcing himself to keep the conversation moving.

Janet scoffed, her fangs retracting slightly. "Hardly so banal. They are the things most precious to our souls. Timothy, unfortunately, has a claim to part of mine, which is why he must die." She nuzzled Jack's shoulder.

"Back off Mom, I literally have his DNA. He's mine," Tim protested. "Just because you have dibs doesn't mean you get to keep him!"

"Get your own primary hoard member," she countered. "This one's my favorite."

"Not for long he won't be!"

Tim tried to pounce, but he still wasn't moving properly. Bruce just grabbed and tucked him closer, using his Batman muscles to stop Tim from restarting the death match. Jack was doing the same with Janet, so the dragons quickly devolved into snarling at each other in Draconic. If they couldn't physically eviscerate each other they could at least do it verbally.

It was good that Jack's attempts to learn the language failed miserably or he'd make them wash their mouths with soap. The joke was on him though; there was no such thing as Draconic aside from extremely graphic insults. That was the only language their kind needed and they'd perfected it.

"They've been fighting over me since he started to crawl," Jack said over their hisses. "Luckily, I've gotten very good at breaking up their spats."

He rolled up his sleeves to show off the Kevlar bracers he always wore. They had visible bite marks on them, as well as some melted bits on the edges.

"That's… a lot of teeth marks," Dick commented.

"Hn," Bruce agreed.

"Oh, I'm used to it," Jack said casually. "Honestly, I'm just glad you're here. You're the only ones outside of the family that Tim's latched onto. Aside from you, it's just been me in his hoard. It's been a real blessing having you look out for him, although I apologize for the misunderstanding. I'm not in the habit of revealing our family circumstances, so it slipped my mind."

Tim rolled his eyes. Jack was so forgetful. (He pointedly ignored how he'd also forgotten to tell them. He figured they'd already known.)

"You consider us part of your hoard, Tim?" Bruce said, squeezing Tim's shoulder. Tim smiled up at him, showing off his wickedly sharp teeth. All 72 of them.

"Yeah, I love you, Dick, and Alfred," he said. "You're my favorite people ever."

The Waynes' expressions melted. Bruce squeezed him tighter and Dick leaned in for a smothering hug. Alfred even patted Tim's head.

Jack looked extremely happy and gave Janet her own half-hug, cooing over both of them. For once, Tim wasn't growling at the show of affection between them (which could be construed as Jack showing hoard preference). He had his own hoard cuddling him right now, and that bled the aggression right out.

"It's a relief coming clean about this if I'm being honest," Jack said once the embarrassing emotions stopped. "Tim's always had a hard time fitting in with humans, but he's taken to you like a duck to water."

"Well, quality time does that," Dick said happily, "I'd like to think we get along after all the time we've spent together."

Jack nodded in agreement. "Exactly. You have no idea how happy I was when he started actually talking to you. Until then he'd just stalked you through Gotham with his camera every night, and even if you can learn a lot about a person that way it's just not the same as a traditional get-to-know-you conversation, you know?"

Dick and Bruce looked at Tim, the relief sliding off their faces.

"You stalked us?" Dick said.

"Every night?" Bruce said.

"Yep! Since I was nine!" Tim smiled happily. He'd have to show them his pictures, they'd be so impressed.

"Since you were…" Bruce was getting that pained expression again. Tim was so used to it that he barely even noticed.

“That’s what I get for telling him to find a hobby,” Jack said tiredly. “Photography, he said. Just not what *kind.”*

Bruce looked like he was going to get an ulcer. And then he registered something else Jack had let slip.

“Wait, you also know I’m Batman?”

Jack shrugged and gestured at the under armor Bruce was wearing (which, fair) then said, “Of course I do. Tim told us almost immediately after he became Robin. We’re not in Gotham full time but that doesn’t mean we’re neglectful.”

Which started an even funner conversation that involved a lot of yelling about CPS and proper guardianship. Tim quickly tuned it all out, realizing it was just them being stupid about human customs again. Good thing that wasn’t his problem.

“You know this isn’t sustainable,” Dick said to Jack. “Not only are Tim and Janet actively trying to murder each other, but they’re getting worse at hiding it. Bruce and I have been trying to get both of you arrested for months.”

Tim and Janet cocked their heads. This was news to them and Tim had honestly forgotten that was why the Waynes had stormed over to Drake Manor in the first place.

Jack leaned back on the couch, looking twice his age. “I know, but there isn’t much else I can do. Tim only stays here because I beg him to. He’d vanish into the wilderness and disappear forever if I didn’t. Janet needs constant supervision so she won’t start eating people, and Gotham’s social services aren’t equipped for nonhumans. I just want my son to have a healthy childhood with loving parents, and foster care can't give him that.”

Tim wanted to point out that he wasn't a kid, and that he’d already had a wonderful childhood but knew that wouldn’t do much good. He settled for optimism instead, however misplaced it was.

“Don’t worry Dad, our strategy is working great,” Tim said brightly, “and we only have three more years to go!"

He'd just think of it as dragon boot camp. Other adult dragons would be a piece of cake to kill compared to Janet. He probably had more practice fighting his own kind than most dragons his age at this point… not that there *were* many adult dragons. Most hatchlings got eaten young, so few actually made it to adulthood.

"Yes, we will manage until then," Janet said, poking at her new bandages. "Timothy is quite adept at defending himself. Most of my cousins were much easier to kill, and he's even kept all of his limbs."

Bruce and Dick did not look comforted by that, but Tim was delighted by the praise. He was still a juvenile and she thought so highly of him? Today was the day of bragging about her kid, apparently.

"Yeah," Tim said, "as long as you guys keep traveling, I'll be fine. And Mom and I have a lot of fun fighting each other, so don't worry about hard feelings. We'll get through this and then I can go make my own nest somewhere else and we'll never have to see each other again."

He'd wanted to go to Alaska when he was younger, but San Francisco was also looking good. Or Bangladesh, though he'd have to make sure no other dragons lived there already. There were a lot on that side of the world.

"Or," Bruce said, "you could give custody of Tim over to me."

There was a moment of silence as everyone considered his words. Dick and Alfred looked determined, Tim wasn't sure how this was relevant, Jack was scrunching his eyebrows together, and Janet cocked her head in confusion.

"Custody?" She parroted.

"The care and keeping of a child," Alfred said smoothly. "It is an admirable responsibility and deeply coveted by many humans."

Janet's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, that silly thing. It's interchangeable?"

“Circumstantially, yes,” Alfred said.

Janet whirled on Jack, looking aghast.

“That was an option this whole time?” she said. “You lied to me!”

“No, I told you abandoning him in the woods was off the table,” Jack said. “Good people don’t just get rid of children, Janet.”

“Nonsense! How else will they grow up properly?” she said.

“Besides, morality is a human social construct,” Tim commented helpfully, “it doesn’t apply to dragons.”

“Not now, Tim,” Bruce, Dick, and Jack said in unison.

Tim pouted and went back to lazily kicking Janet’s feet. You bring up *one* good point…

“I told you, Jan, we’d need a good guardian if it ever came down to that,” Jack continued, “and you know what custody is, I went over it during our ‘being human’ classes. Remember the CPS lesson?”

“That fairytale?” Janet cocked her head. “You said they kidnapped children and put them in communes.”

“Orphanages and group homes,” Jack corrected. “Those aren’t communes, just like schools aren’t prisons.”

Janet looked unconvinced, much like Tim. He’d been in school his whole life and could confirm it was basically jail. As for orphanages? They were definitely communes, even with Bruce waging

war (AKA throwing money) at them to make them better.

“CPS is very real,” Dick said in the same tone he’d used when he had to explain that to Tim months ago. “It’s not a fairy tale.”

Janet looked at him mistrustfully. “Are you sure?”

Was Dick’s eye supposed to twitch like that?

“Regardless of that,” Bruce said, giving Dick an ‘ignore it’ look, “you seem to care a lot about Tim’s wellbeing. Giving him to me is the best outcome for everyone. I’m willing to overlook Tim and Janet’s… relationship if it means getting him to a safe, stable home. We’re close enough that you and Janet can visit occasionally and Tim won’t be left on his own. We already know his secret as well, which seems to be your main concern.”

Jack bit his lip, both hopeful and mulish. Tim looked between him and Bruce curiously, not overly concerned with the outcome. Custody was a human law that he was doing his best to follow, but aside from determining where he slept at the end of the day, it didn’t seem to matter much.

“I want partial custody,” Jack said at length. “I promised myself that Tim would be my legal responsibility until he was eighteen and I’m not breaking that vow. He’s too important to me.”

“We can negotiate,” Bruce said, ruffling Tim’s hair. “Now that I know you want what’s best for him, I’m willing to be a lot more generous.”

Tim squawked, then leaned into the touch. Unlike Dick and Jack, Bruce didn’t smother him too badly. It was like being hugged by a brick wall, which was way better than an octopus death grip.

“Good,” Janet said, getting shakily to her feet. “You can discuss your human problems then. I will be happy to have him leave. I want my nest back to myself.”

She stalked out of the room, limping slightly. Seconds later, Tim heard cabinets in the kitchen slam open and the clatter of knives. Dinner?

“Don’t take her personally, Tim,” Jack said. “You know she loves you.”

“Duh,” Tim answered, “she almost ripped my jaw off earlier. Of course she adores me! But I’d rather live with Bruce and Dick. It’s not very fun expecting to be eaten alive whenever I come home.”

“I’d think not,” Alfred said primly. "Fortunately, we've had a room prepared for you for many months. It will be simple to relocate you there permanently."

“But you’re always welcome back here,” Jack added, “this is still your home, kiddo, and I expect you to stick to our Skype calls.”

Tim groaned. “Socialization is the worst though.”

“Even with your dad?”

He considered it. “Well, it’s tolerable with you, I guess.”

And Janet, when they got to discuss murder and gore. That was the best kind of small talk.

“Aw, I love you too, son,” Jack said happily.

Jack looked disgustingly tender-hearted, which made Tim regret verbalizing an emotion other than annoyance. He liked that his dad was happy, but he was just so… expressive… about it. Tim never knew how to handle that. It was so embarrassing.

Luckily, Janet saved him by returning with a platter of raw meat. She threw a steak at his head in a gesture of maternal affection and Tim didn’t have to think about how to say the dreaded L word a second time that day. His emotional capacity was officially burned out.

While both dragons chewed on their steaks, Jack and Bruce hashed out a child-custody agreement that their lawyers would notarize. It took them a long time since Bruce kept trying to sneak in clauses for extra custody. They ended up spending the rest of the afternoon there until enough compromises could be made.

Two more fights broke out between Tim and Janet, three more fire extinguishers got used (one of them blasted directly at Tim), an entire outside-facing wall was destroyed, and Jack got to show off his drake-wrangling skills as he yanked them apart. All in all, the parlor was even worse off than earlier by the time Tim's things were packed and the ink was dry.

By the time they left Drake Manor the Waynes looked like they'd gone up against Killer Croc, Scarecrow, and Ivy all at once. Jack acted like this was just another Tuesday, and thanked them again for taking Tim in.

He also warned them about the hostile Middle-Eastern dragon blood feud fiasco, but only as an absent heads up when he was closing the front door.

The Waynes stared at the mahogany blankly, then turned to Tim for answers.

"Blood feud?" Bruce asked.

Tim shrugged. "Mom dug up a bunch of their ancestor's corpses or something, I dunno much about it. If they try to kill me, I'll let you know."

"Joy," Dick said. "Just the thing I wanted to add to my plate."

"Fortunately, it sounds like an issue we can table until tomorrow," Alfred said, "For now, I think it would be wise to go home and recuperate."

Home.

Tim beamed in excitement, skipping along with them as they walked back up to Wayne Manor.

“I can’t believe I get to live with you now, this is like a dream come true,” he said. “You should have just told me you wanted custody earlier. This is going to be so much fun!”

He’d get Alfred’s cooking every day, quality time with Bruce and Dick, and enough bats in the cave to snack on for the rest of his life. And best of all? He’d finally get a nest all to himself; no more of Janet’s scent cloying the halls and making him want to bathe the walls in blood to cover it up. He’d finally get to relax in his own space.

Was this joy? Happiness? Freedom? He liked it.

“This was the best day ever,” he gushed as they walked back up the manor drive. “Everything went perfectly.”

“Glad you think so chum,” Bruce said, smiling tiredly. “It was… something, alright.”

Tim nodded happily and latched onto Bruce's arm. Bruce looked like he couldn't decide whether to be happy at the contact or deeply uncomfortable. The perfect reaction to physical affection if Tim ever saw one. This was why Bruce was his favorite.

"Next time, you should listen to me when I say not to bother Mom," he chided, "I thought she was going to kill you for real. Dad always forgets that could actually happen."

He was used to jumping between Tim and Janet during fights. They always went out of their way not to hurt him, so he tended to forget that they wouldn’t extend that courtesy to other humans.

"Yeah, I noticed he's a few crayons short of a box," Dick said.

"Dad's not crazy," Tim said, rolling his eyes. "He's just really weird. So's Mom, kind of. It's a miracle I turned out so normal."

The Waynes all grimaced at that statement. A cricket chirped somewhere in the distance.

"Out of curiosity Tim," Dick said, "do you even know what that word means?"

“Of course I do!” Tim said, “My definition is just different than yours. It’s not my fault nothing you do makes sense.”

Tim sighed and shook his head. He’d have to spend a lot of time getting the Waynes up to speed on dragons, it seemed. Silly humans, they really were hopeless.

Luckily, he didn’t mind taking the time to re-educate them properly. They were his and no amount of fretting or misunderstandings would change that.

He tugged Bruce toward Wayne Manor, smiling with all of his teeth. Even the sting of his new stitches didn’t dampen his mood. Bruce, Alfred, Dick, all his at last, and he never had to leave them again.

It made him so happy he could almost cry.

Chapter End Notes

....End of Part 1. Next arc coming soon to an Archive near you. 😉😈

Cut from this chapter because it was getting Too Long:

Alfred: Perhaps I shall go make tea.
Tim: Um, you shouldn't. You know, for health reasons.
Jack *suspicious*: What did you do.
Tim: I MAY have poisoned the well earlier. You know, to kill mom.
Bruce:
Dick:
Alfred:
Jack: Of course you did. Well, I'll just grab us all some sodas then--
Janet *coughs*: I wouldn't do that if I were you. It all has a fatal dose of hemlock in it.
Jack: ...are you serious? Poison? BOTH of you?
Janet & Tim: 😇😇😇

great minds think alike, y'all.

Home is Where the Hoard Is

Chapter Summary

Tim: Yes, I get to spend forever with my hoard, life is good!

Tim: Wait, what do you mean there are rules?

Chapter Notes

I just spent over 5 hours editing part 2. Guys, I didn't even get through half of it. My brain is swiss cheese. What even is my name? Who am I? What is reality???

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Settling in took a couple of days, but only because Tim had to go straight to the hospital to get his face fixed. The surgery was as annoying as ever, but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing Janet was going through the same hassle.

Still, Tim was ecstatic when he finally arrived at his official new home, fresh out of surgery on a beautiful April afternoon. Birds were screeching, the sun was covered by pollution, and the trees were still trapped in post-winter hibernation. It was a perfect day and Tim couldn’t be happier.

Now that that pesky custody agreement was hashed out, Tim had the legal right to treat Wayne Manor the same way he treated the Drake estate. Except it was *better* because now he didn't have to share with Janet. Take that, Mom.

The first thing Tim did was run around the manor to scent it. The world needed to know that Wayne Manor was his and that to attack it was a death sentence. Nobody, not even Janet, was allowed in here on pain of ultimate suffering.

"Oh, is that what you're doing?" Dick said as Tim hugged another marble pillar, rubbing his aching face against the smooth stone.

"All who enter here will die," Tim replied. "And I'll make it *hurt."*

"Only if they are unwelcome, I hope," Alfred said, wandering past with one of Tim's duffels. "Master Tim, do be a dear and help unpack. You can embrace your new home later."

Oh, right, whoops.

Tim grabbed the bag from Alfred and ran upstairs, throwing it onto his bed. It landed with a loud thump.

Growing up, Tim had been reluctant to acquire things. Something about storing them in Janet's hoard sat wrong with him. It worked to his advantage this time though, because it meant moving nests was easy. He'd be unpacked super quick.

Well, quick *-ish* .

"I thought you said you *didn't* have much?" Dick gasped, setting down another heavy suitcase. "This weighs as much as my emotional trauma."

They'd already made three trips to Drake manor for his stuff and even Bruce's eyebrows were to his hairline as they brought in box after box.

Tim unzipped the case and pulled out hematite chucks, quartz stones, jade, obsidian, sandstone blocks… yup, all here. Good to know Janet didn’t steal any of his pretty rocks.

"I don't," Tim said, "just little things. You should see Mom's collection."

Janet had an entire wing of the house dedicated to her hoard. Tim only had a single room stuffed with his treasures. His hoard was practically nonexistent.

"I think I pulled a muscle," Dick grumbled, glaring at Tim's rocks.

"Poor thing," Tim said, "feel better."

He patted Dick's head. There, emotional comfort complete. Jack always said head pats healed injuries faster. Time to put that to the test.

Dick's grumpy expression melted into a goofy smile as Tim went back to unpacking his rocks, already planning the best places to put them. This chunk of basalt would look great by the coat rack.

Or maybe next to Jason's suit. It could use a friend… Tim eyed his boxes of photo albums, an idea sprouting in his mind. That dreary old case could use a *lot* of friends.

***

Or not, because when Bruce saw all the photos of Jason that Tim superglued to the memorial case he broke down into gross, ugly sobs.

Tim tried to calm him down for all of thirty seconds before realizing this was beyond his pay grade. He ran and got Alfred, who called Dick, who then spent the next two hours comforting Bruce and prattling about emotional vulnerability and non-linear grief, which he no doubt learned from a self-help book or WikiHow.

Tim glared at the improved memorial case. It was *supposed* to make people happy, not give Tim hives from secondhand emotions.

Oh well, too late now. That glue wasn’t ever coming off. Tim had used the good stuff.

He’d just go back to Drake Manor and fight Janet. That’d be a good way to pass the time until Bruce was stoic again.

***

Tim and Janet weren't allowed to fight each other during recovery. Apparently, it was "bad" for their health and "distressed" all the humans. Please, just because they didn't have a healing factor didn't mean they were helpless when injured. Dragons were actually *more* dangerous when wounded. Tim *knew* Jack knew this, so why was he making such a fuss? This was just how Tim and Janet bonded.

But Jack was insistent — and by insistent, Tim meant that he was constantly sniffling into tissues because his son was "growing up too fast" and "too far away to hug on an hourly basis" — so Tim was forced to have a normal dinner with his parental figures instead of a nice afternoon mauling one of them. It was a total killjoy.

Oh well, he'd just make up for the lack of violence on patrol.

***

"What do you mean I can't patrol?" He demanded.

"Tim, you're recovering from an intense cosmetic surgery, have stitches on both arms, and two bruised ribs," Bruce said, eyes red but no longer crying. "You're not going out on the streets until they're healed."

Preposterous. Ludicrous. Absolutely absurd.

"You can't tell me what to do," he said. "The city needs me!"

Well, more Like Two-Face needed a punch to the face. Harvey got green whenever Tim got close and wouldn't even look him in the eyes anymore. It was hilarious. Tim didn't want to miss out before the man was back in Arkham.

"I have custody over you," Bruce said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Legally, I *can* tell you what to do, especially when it's about your health and safety."

“That doesn’t mean I’ll listen,” Tim argued, crossing his arms defiantly. He did *not* flinch from the movement. Pain was fake news. “Custody is a placebo.”

“Come on Timmy, it’ll be fun,” Dick said, “I’ll stay home the first half of the night. We can watch TV together and hang out —”

“No! I would rather have Killer Croc bite my arm off,” Tim said. Dick wasn’t allowed near a TV around Tim anymore. He had trauma. “Please B? I’ll be good, I won’t even eat anyone unless they’re super bad!”

Or mildly annoying. Or smelled good. Or —

He bit his lip and made his eyes really, really big. Bruce visibly hesitated until Dick slapped his arm.

Dangit.

“You’ll stay home and recover,” Bruce said, “I don’t want your injuries to get worse. This is final.”

Tim flopped onto the sofa and groaned in abject misery. Why had he left Drake Manor? What did he do to deserve this? Why did his hoard have to be so smothering?

Oh well, he’d appease them for the night. It wasn’t like they were always going to be this bad, right?

***

Tim had been wrong. He had been so *so* wrong.

Over the next two weeks, Bruce was a mother hen that lurked in the shadows and left smoothies and yogurt around for Tim to eat, Dick was a limpet constantly draping himself over Tim, and

Alfred just had this *look* that made Tim stop climbing out windows and flying for freedom.

He hated it. This level of coddling was suffocating. No wonder Janet only had one human in her hoard. She was smart, she knew her limits. Tim was an idiot. Jack's son through and through. The power of human love would be his doom.

"I want to go home," he said, faceplanted on a couch, "I hate it here."

It was like having three Jacks hovering over him. Tim couldn't handle this level of TLC, it was incompatible with his biology.

"Oh Timmy, I'm sorry, is there anything we can do to —" Dick started.

"You can let me eat someone," Tim said, "or a lot of someones. I'd feel better if I did."

Alfred let him eat all the raw meat he wanted, but it wasn't the same as hunting for himself. And sadly, Wayne Manor had no mice. Tim, therefore, had to move on to bigger prey.

"...I don't think that's an option, Tim."

"You're mean."

Dick made a sad sound.

"The absolute worst," Tim continued. "Mom never says no to me. She's the best."

"You think *Janet* is a better parent than me?"

Okay, did Dick really have to sound so offended? Janet was the ideal mother and literal perfection.

“You’re not my parent, weirdo. You don't even have kids,” he said, “and Mom is super awesome. If I can be half as cool as her when I grow up, I’ll be happy forever.”

She didn’t smother him with lethal amounts of hugs or force him to watch asinine human courtships televised for the masses. No, she attacked him with extreme prejudice and always tried to make Jack forget his birthday, like a *proper* parent.

Tim wished he could fight her again. Or at least de-stress over some other kind of violence. Alas, life could never be so convenient, could it? Jack was keeping her at bedrest (AKA under house arrest) until her shoulder had full range of motion back, and if Tim snuck over to fight her again he’d just be forced to play catch with Jack for hours. Tim hated catch, so he was denied Janet’s standard maternal affections until she was better.

So close yet so far. Truly, there was no greater torture than tantalizingly accessible parricide.

Tim sighed so loudly that he almost missed Dick’s affronted mutters.

“The Titans are basically children, they count! I am *so* much better at this than her,” he grumbled, “I’ll show Janet. How hard can parenting be?”

Tim tried to suffocate himself in the couch cushions. Recovery couldn’t come fast enough.

***

Tim’s malaise was apparently bad for his hoard’s mental health. Dick was tearing through parenting manuals with a concerning mania, Bruce was talking to Jack *all the time* , and Alfred… Well, okay, Alfred was normal but Tim disliked being chastised for carving “die Joker die” and “Two-Face sucks” into the antique furniture. As far as he was concerned vandalism gave things character.

Tim’s only escape from the madness was Babs, who he was still taking coding lessons from. They mostly skyped and screen shared. She was happy that Tim was with the Waynes now and didn’t treat Tim any differently now that she knew he was a dragon.

(The Waynes told her Tim was a dragon, right? That had happened at some point, right? Eh, not his problem.)

“So, remind me again what Bruce decided to do to your parents,” Babs said as she troubleshooted Tim’s new algorithm. “The Birds of Prey exploded with drama last week, so I missed that part of the hullabaloo. They going to jail?”

Tim added a few extra zeros to his code for fun, just to see what they’d go. It turned his entire computer screen green and made a pained, whining noise. Cool.

“Why would they go to jail?” Tim asked. “They didn’t do anything wrong. And I think Dad and B are friends now.”

Jack had sent Bruce all of Tim’s baby photos and an entire PDF of dragon care tips. That made them friends, right?

“Hey Babs, your screen is frozen,” Tim said, pressing a few more random buttons. “And I think the lighting filter glitched. You look paler than a dead fish in Gotham Bay.”

Barbara pinched the bridge of her noise and breathed deeply. She looked ready to throw a punch. It was a good look for her. Tim approved.

“He’s *what* with Jack Drake? ” she hissed.

“Oh good, your screen is working! The lighting is still weird though. You look really red now.” Tim said, tapping out a few more random lines of code. The computer whirred loudly as the fan went full blast.

“Tim, I need you to clarify what you just —”

He pressed enter and there was a loud pop, followed by a disturbing fizz. The computer shorted out and smoke rose from the busted fans, screen black and signal lost.

Huh. That was weird. Maybe he could do something similar to Arkham?

***

So, the Waynes *hadn't* told Babs, which Tim only found out because she drove to Wayne Manor and shouted at Dick and Bruce for an hour about keeping her updated. Somehow, she managed to appear taller than them even in a wheelchair.

When she finally ran out of breath, Alfred calmly asked her if she'd like to stay for dinner.

"Sure thing Alfie," she said, tucking her hair behind her ears. "And the boys can tell me anything else they conveniently forgot to mention over the last *three weeks."*

Bruce and Dick cringed.

***

Dinner ended up being a Q&A on dragons. Tim was getting a crash course on patience. He'd never realized how tedious explaining things was. 0/10 would not recommend. Babs, Tim could forgive, but didn't Bruce have that PDF? He should just read that instead.

"Oh, so she wasn't trying to kill you, she just wanted to *eat* you," Babs muttered, "that makes everything so much better."

"Hey, don't judge," Tim said, "I'd taste delicious. Besides, that's just what moms do."

"I wouldn't eat you," Dick mumbled into his water cup.

Everyone gave him a weird look and collectively decided to ignore that comment.

“Besides,” Tim said, “dragons love to eat each other. Mom’s devoured tons.”

“Right. How many other dragons has she eaten, exactly?” Bruce said, brow furrowed.

Tim wrapped spaghetti around his fork and counted off on his fingers. “Well there were the other eggs in her clutch — she hatched first and had to eat them for nutrients. She said there were five? — and then there were her cousins and the neighboring clan, and one who tried to take over their mountain. Oh, and her own mother too. But those all happened over a long period of time. It’s been at least ten years since her last major fight — wait, never mind. I think she killed that Saudi Arabian dragon a few months ago.”

Classic Janet. She never passed up a duel to the death.

“That’s a lot of dragons,” Dick said, poking at his food.

“Yeah, isn’t she awesome?” Tim said, “I’m sad I didn’t have siblings in my clutch, I would’ve grown much faster if I’d been able to eat them.”

He didn’t even know if he’d been an egg or a human baby. Again, the grounds of *ew* meant he refused to look into it. Still, Tim knew he’d be short for a lot longer. Everything he ate went toward growing his draconic side, so his human form was slightly stunted. Some extra nutrients would have gone a long way.

“I didn’t even get to fight other dragonlings in the wild like Mom did because Dad wanted me to stay home,” he continued with a sigh, “I've lost so many formative experiences.”

Sure, he might have been eaten by another one of his kind, but that was just how life went. Jack had no right to freak out so much over that. If Janet could make it, Tim could too. Survival of the fittest was the GOAT.

Dick pushed his plate away from himself. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Can I have it?” Tim said. He was ravenous all the time now. Puberty sucked. Maybe he *should* start traveling the continent for dragonlings to snack on. Were there even any major clans in North America? He didn’t think so. Darn yellow fever killed them all off.

Dick handed Tim his plate. Tim shoveled it in, commenting that spaghetti was fun to eat because it looked like worms and had the texture of unpopped arteries.

Bruce pushed his plate away and stared at the ceiling. It kind of looked like he was praying to a higher power to strike him with lightning.

Barbara just looked done with the world, but she finished her food.

“Well, isn’t this lovely,” Alfred commented as he brought in dessert, “perhaps this will be a fitting lesson not to bring up sensitive topics around food.”

“It’s not sensitive,” Tim said, licking his plate, “although now I’m craving raw flesh.”

“I shall see what I can do about that tomorrow, but first have some sweets,” Alfred said, “and while you may be comfortable with all manner of topics, I believe the others would appreciate more a palatable conversation while they eat.”

Tim cocked his head, then made an understanding sound. Jack had also been squeamish. He'd have to censure himself at meals for the delicate humans.

He looked down and gasped happily.

"Hey, is this flan?" He said, "This is my favorite! It's like eating stomach lining coated in silicone."

Dick shuddered and pushed his plate further away. Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. Barbara was amused, but she also refused to touch her dessert.

Tim wondered if he could have their helpings. Wouldn’t want to waste it, and sugar was good for growth spurts, right?

Chapter End Notes

All the comments: Bruce and Jack dad-friendship!

Me: Dick and Janet Mom-rivarly!

Meanwhile, Talia: Jason, hun, have you read the anger management book I lent you yet?
Jason: Sorry, too busy rereading The Count of Monte Cristo for the 17th time. Coincidentally, I think I'm ready to go back to Gotham.
Talia: ... Apparently even a Lazurus pit couldn't take the melodrama out of you.
Jason: I'm not dramatic! But if I HAD to choose a fake identity, do you think Red Hood has the right amount of poetic irony--
Talia: adopting you was a mistake, wasn't it?

Taking a Bite Out of Crime

Chapter Summary

Tim is cleared for Robin duty!

Coincidentally, Penguin is now offering therapy to his hired goons for worker's comp.

Chapter Notes

My mom, a hobby ornithologist gushing about the latest birding memoir she read: Bird of prey don't respond to training methods like other animals (dogs, horses, etc), and attempting to use those will only harm them mentally. Of course, people anthropomorphize them anyway, but owls and hawks (etc) just don't understand the world like people do. Attempting to shoehorn them into fitting a mold doesn't work. They can only be convinced to do something in the politest of ways (i.e. bribery and friendship).

Me *frantically taking notes because this sounds exactly like Tim and Janet*: I see, do go on Mother dearest.

She then went on to talk about this owl that tried to feed its owner mice because it loved her so much, and honestly I think that needs to be part of this fic at some point. Tim would totally do that. :)

chapter edited 10/21/23. New scene in the beginning! I found it in my drafts, gasped in outrage that I hadn't originally included it, and endeavored to fix this egregious mistake.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While he recovered, Tim made it his mission to improve Wayne Manor. It was a great nest, but it was severely lacking in several areas; now that he was part of the manor he could finally right those wrongs.

"Master Tim, what in heaven's name are you doing? It is five in the morning," Alfred said. "You have school in three hours."

Tim crawled out from under the sink. "Really? Perfect, I'm almost done."

He'd wrap this up just in time to pass out during homeroom. He always got his best sleep in that class.

"Answer the question, lad. What has captured your interest under there?" Alfred asked.

Tim blinked, then nodded. Right. He lived with people full-time now, not just whenever Jack came back. Sharing space was weird.

"I'm fixing the house," he said. "Today is the kitchen, tomorrow is the garage, then I'm going to fix the technology rooms."

"Fix?"

"Yeah. See?" He showed Alfred the lair he'd made under the sink, complete with pillows and blankets in case Tim needed to hide a hoard member in there while he fought off invading dragons. Alfred and Bruce were too big, but he could probably stuff Dick in there. He was pretty bendy.

Alfred pursed his lips. "Master Tim, the sink is not a proper place for forts."

"Not forts, nests," Tim said. The distinction was important. "Plus access to fresh water, which increases survivability. We need to expect the worst."

He already had plans to built a back up bomb shelter under the rose bushes. It was a miracle the Waynes hadn't been picked off yet, great human security notwithstanding. Tim needed to dragon proof this house pronto.

"You really are too much like Master Bruce," Alfred sighed. "Overly paranoid, the both of you. Now get out, you need to prepare for your education. You don't want to forget everything you learn in class because you're tired."

Tim rolled to his feet and scoffed. "Can't lose knowledge you don't have. Human Child Jail is useless."

He'd have so much more time with the Waynes if he didn't have to attend Gotham Academy. Curse Jack for getting sniffly whenever Tim tried to drop out. He already knew everything he needed to survive.

Alfred hummed in agreement as he showed Tim out the room.

Once back in his room, Tim began the agonizing process of getting ready for school. It sucked, but at least he'd be unconscious for most of it. Even the teachers knew better than to wake Tim Drake up if they wanted to keep their fingers.

Still, he couldn't wait for the day he didn't have to go anymore. Or, at the very least, go on patrol again so he could sleep during the day like he was used to.

He absently poked his cheek with his tongue, feeling the invisible stitches crisscrossing it.

It shouldn't be long before they were finished healing. He just had to be a little patient.

***

Patience paid off, and Tim felt as if he'd reached a new level of maturity.

He smushed his cheeks together in the mirror, inspecting them with a critical eye. No pain, no scars, plenty of baby fat. For all intents and purposes, *healed.*

Four weeks with no patrol and he'd behaved the whole time. This had to be a new record, as well as a record for posterity. Nobody could question the fact that Tim *aced* his recovery period.

But just because he was healed didn't mean he was out of the woods. The real question was whether the Waynes would unbench him, or keep being overprotective humans. Tim was going stir-crazy from lack of vigilantism, he had to play his cards right.

Tim smushed his cheeks even more and frowned. He was pretty sure he could convince them, but it was difficult seeing as how whenever they spoke it felt like they were at a poker tournament and Tim only had Uno cards. They were really hung up on the whole scars thing. Weirdos.

Still, if he was allowed to go to school he should be allowed on patrol. They were basically the same thing since he was around humans, although he punched less people at school.

Yeah, that was a logical argument. Bruce couldn't say no to that.

***

Well, he could, but Tim was getting very good at Bambi eyes.

Steph was right, they were a great way to get what he wanted. Bruce immediately crumbled and Tim was cleared for Robin duty starting on Monday. His face was shiny and new, his teeth were sharp, and he was *aching* for a fight.

***

The night of Tim's triumphant return to vigilantism, he was ambushed by Jack and Bruce in the cave.

The bats were out of hibernation and starting to get active again, and the steady drip of water echoed off the walls. It smelled like dank and rain, and Tim's feet were always cold when he came down here. So, no, not a hallucination. His dad really was in the Batcave for some reason.

Jack and Bruce didn't look affected by the cool temperature. Then again, they had shoes and jackets. Tim was dressed in gym shorts and Dick's old tank top since he needed to change into the Robin uniform.

"What are you doing here?" Tim asked bluntly. "You have a 5 AM flight."

Janet and Jack were going back to world traveling. It was partly out of habit, their list of pre-planned digs, and an attempt to throw the Middle-Eastern dragons off their scent. An added perk was more distance from Tim, though Jack didn't see that as a positive.

Jack waved that minor detail away. "You didn't think I'd miss saying goodbye to my little drake, did you? Besides, I need a photo of you and Bruce together for the scrapbook."

Tim hummed ambivalently. He was a photographer, but even he thought Jack took too many photos. Oh well, as long as it made him happy.

"Ok, you said goodbye. So, goodbye," Tim said, stepping back from Jack's attempt to hug him.

"You're just like your mother," Jack laughed, ruffling Tim's hair instead, "don't worry, I won't keep you from your crime fighting. I just need to talk to you first, man-to-man."

Tim nodded in confusion, wondering why Bruce was also there. Did more men increase the manliness of the talk? Was that how this worked?

. . . It was 11 PM. That way too late for these deep musings. Tim would just chalk it up to more human nonsense.

Jack patted Tim's shoulder and dropped his goofy smile, looking serious for once in his life. Behind him, Bruce crossed his arms and kept his face blank.

"Tim, I want you to know I'm incredibly proud of you," Jack said. "Not a day goes by that I'm not blown away by what you're doing as Robin, even if it scares the bejeezus out of me. But I worry, okay? No matter how strong you are, there's a chance that you might not come home and that *terrifies* me."

Tim saw Bruce's eyes flicker toward Jason's memorial case. The dragon hunched his shoulders, feeling duck-footed as this conversation steered toward dangerously emotional territory.

“ —I trust Bruce and the others to do their best to keep you safe, but there are no guarantees with this sort of thing,” Jack said. He took a deep breath. “So, if you’re ever in danger, I want you to do *anything* you can to protect yourself. Biting, scratching, maiming, it doesn’t matter. Just promise me you’ll find a way home, no matter what, son.”

He cupped Tim’s cheek and locked eyes with him. Tim resisted the urge to look away. Janet's eyes were more intense, but Jack’s magnified all of his feelings by a factor of 1440. It made Tim fidget. Feelings were supposed to stay *inside.*

Still, Jack was asking. Tim knew better than to say no to him, especially for something he was going to do anything.

“I promise, Dad. Trust me, I have no plans of dying,” he mumbled, “No need to be dramatic. You’re so embarrassing.”

“Alright, alright. Have your personal space then.” Jack laughed and stepped back, looking like a big weight had dropped off his shoulders. Bruce was smiling as well, just a little. Gross.

“I should probably get back,” Jack said to Bruce, “Janet doesn’t like letting me out of her sight. You’re in for a treat with Tim. Dragons have separation issues, and let me tell you they only get more intense —”

Tim kicked the floor, mulling over this new vow he was under. Blah blah, safety and whatever. But Jack had slipped something else in there. Something about maulings.

Did Tim hear that right? Did that mean what he thought it did? He needed to clarify.

“Sooooo, Dad. You said I could do whatever it takes to come home?”

Jack nodded distractedly, checking his phone for messages from Janet. There were over 50 notifications. “As long as you’re safe Tim, you can do anything.”

Tim cocked his head. "So, technically, I don't have to pretend to be human while I'm Robin?"

Jack quickly put away his phone and shared a loaded glance with Bruce. After a second, Bruce stepped forward and cleared his throat.

"We want you to be safe in an emergency, even if that means revealing your secret," Bruce said slowly. "Jack and I have talked about this a lot. As long as you prioritize your health, you can keep being Robin."

Right, because they got to decide that for him. As if Tim wouldn't steal Jason's old hoodie and be Robin regardless of their opinions.

"Exactly. Nothing is more important than defending yourself," Jack agreed. "I don't care how many people you have to kill, just stay alive."

Bruce shot Jack an alarmed look. "That's not —"

Tim just hummed happily. "Thanks for clearing that up Dad."

He skipped over to the lockers as Bruce started going off on his Standard Morality Lecture. Jack just made another hand-wavey motion and said something about family being all that really mattered at the end of the day.

Tim forgot sometimes that Jack's morals were different than Bruce's. As long as Tim and Janet were okay, Jack could be pretty flexible. Aside from the eating humans thing, apparently. Figures *that* was where he drew the line.

Tim grabbed the Robin uniform and threw it on with gusto, much more excited for patrol than before. Crime fighting was going to be a lot more fun now that he didn't have to hold back.

***

To be fair, even if Jack hadn't given Tim his blessing, Tim probably would have found an excuse to go overboard anyway. It was puberty's fault.

In Janet's version of The Talk, she mentioned that Tim would only get more aggressive the older he got. Tim was happy to say she was correct. These mood swings were intense, and if she and Jack hadn't just hightailed it out of the country he probably would have picked a fight with his mom on instinct. He was that pent-up.

Pent-up, but not angry. Just craving some good old-fashioned violence, which Gotham, fortunately, had in endless supply.

He made it two weeks before that became a problem on patrol. In his defense, that was a *ridiculously* long amount of time. Fifteen and able to rein in his bloodlust for half a month? Janet would be proud.

Tim wanted it on the record that he could've made it longer. The only reason he went a *teeny* bit overboard with the violence was because his hoard was in danger. Tim was completely justified.

It had started simply enough. A warehouse, Penguin's ridiculously well-dressed posse, and a weapons deal. Tim and Dick were working the main floor while B cleared the upper levels. The sound of cracking bones was cathartic and the brawl a familiar dance.

Of course, Tim would have enjoyed the ASMR more without Nightwing chatting over it and making bad puns.

"Have a nice fall!" Dick said cheerily. "Oh man, that one never gets old."

"Yes it does," Tim replied woodenly.

"I'm unappreciated in my time. By the way, how's school going, Robby?"

Dick had finally started going back to Bludhaven full-time and now only showed up on the weekends, hence why he felt the need to ask these trivial questions.

Tim grunted in response, ducking a henchman's haymacker. "Boring."

"Yeah? What kind of projects do you have right now?" Dick asked, kicking a man in the groin and electrocuting another with his escrima sticks.

Tim contorted to dodge a baseball bat and twisted his joints backward to attack the guy without turning around.

"Holy sh —" the man gasped.

Tim kicked him into a stack of crates. The goon wheezed and didn't get up.

"I dunno," Tim said, "I don't really pay attention to my homework."

Dick laughed and threw a wingding at a retreating gangster, knocking them out with a bonk to their head. "I get that. Homework all feels the same after a while."

"Sure, you could say that," Tim said as he surveyed the room. Tim didn't actually *do* any of his assignments, so he wouldn't know.

The warehouse was in shambles; busted crates, bullet holes everywhere, people groaning in pain. Penguin was nursing a broken nose on the ground and all his underlings were on the floor. Aw man, the fight was over way too quickly.

"Robin!"

Or not.

A goon with nothing to lose grabbed him by his hair and yanked Tim backward, putting a gun to his head. Tim's squeak turned into a hiss as an arm squeezed his throat and cut off his air.

Penguin got to his feet and ran out the door, the money from his latest arms deal in the small briefcase he'd salvaged. Dangit, where had he found the adrenaline?

A couple smart mobsters followed Cobblepot out, but Tim's captor wasn't one of them.

“Don’t move! I’ll blow his head off!” the crook said, shaking Tim by the collar.

Nightwing froze less than twenty feet away, eyes wide. Tim wriggled, trying to get his toes back on the ground. It would suck if *this* was how he went down. Janet would be so embarrassed if a common crook did him in.

“I mean it, just get out of here!” the man yelled, “I’ll do it!”

Did he not understand how hostages worked? He should have been walking toward the door to join Penguin in the getaway car. If he killed Tim, Nightwing would end him. (The thought made Tim feel fuzzy inside.)

Nightwing put his hands up, dropping the escrima sticks. “I hear you man, no need to get angry.”

“Angry? Oh I’m angry alright, we spent weeks on this op and you —”

Tim saw Batman in the rafters aiming for a clear shot with a batarang. Dick took a step closer. A few other goons stirred on the ground, getting their second wind.

“— alm own, if you cooperate it won’t be as bad,” Dick was saying.

Apparently, one of those words was a trigger.

“Calm down? *Cam down?* I’m not going back to Blackgate, there *is* no lesser evil there. I'll take you all down with me!” The goon yelled. He pointed the gun at Nightwing, maybe thinking about going out in a blaze of glory (or maybe he was just really *really* mad).

Either way, he didn't get the shot off. Hurting Tim's hoard was against the rules. He didn’t care if he was a hostage, but as soon as the gun was pointed at Dick, Tim saw red.

He’d get a ton of lectures later, but Tim’s rationality took a backseat. Protective malice took over like in a demented parody of ratatouille, and everything faded into a blur.

All Tim really recalled was biting down on the man’s arm, teeth punching straight through his body armor and into bone, and losing what little self-control he normally had.

It tasted like blood, polymer, and satisfaction.

And Tim was *starving.*

***

“It’s not like I killed him,” he defended once Bruce got most of the lecture out of his system back in the Batcave, “I didn’t break any rules.”

Bruce took a deep breath and said calmly. "Tim, when Jack said do whatever it takes to survive he didn't mean attempt to eat gangsters. Once someone is incapacitated you *stop.* If I hadn't intervened you would have ripped him apart."

Dick nodded from the sidelines, looming both amused and traumatized.

Tim thought this intervention was an overreaction. Sure, he’d continued to maul the man after he’d fainted, and *yes* he was currently in ICU, but he pointed a gun at Dick! Tim’s response was warranted. Besides . . .

"He was a criminal," Tim said, "that means he was free game."

" *No* , it means we stop them," Bruce said.

Tim nodded. "Permanently.”

Dick covered his laugh with a cough and it was the cringiest sound Tim had ever heard.

"Tim, you've been Robin for over a year, you know the rules," Bruce continued. "You never had a problem following them before."

"Yeah, *your rules* ," Tim replied, "but you and Dad told me I could be myself, so I'm making my own."

Being Robin was great, but it was high time to put his own spin on the name. Jason and Dick had both been so distinctive. Tim wanted to leave his mark too!

"What are your rules, if you don't mind me asking?" Alfred said as he brought tea down to the cave.

Tim preened. "Easy! Fight them to the death, winner takes all and loser gets eaten. Waste not want not, you know? Conservation and environmentalism are important, so I'm making them part of my brand."

He was all over any movement that encouraged his dietary habits.

Alfred looked like he regretted asking and Dick seemed queasy. Bruce actually facepalmed, which was amazing. Tim thought he was too old to know how to do that.

"Tim, you can't murder people on patrol," Dick said. "Actually, you can't kill people *ever.* "

Tim rolled his eyes. "No, *you* guys can't, but it's okay. I'm not opposed to it, so I'll get rid of all the bad guys for you. Win-win!"

He had put a lot of thought into this. Bruce wouldn't have to break his code, Dick wouldn't have to go to emergency counseling again for killing someone in a blind rage, and Alfred wouldn't waste any ammo. There was no downside here.

The way the Waynes were staring at him with mortified frowns did not reassure Tim that they were on the same page, but that was fine.

He'd wear them down eventually.

Chapter End Notes

Tim bats his eyes and Bruce crumbles instantly. Dick has to slap him out of it whenever Tim starts making Bambi eyes. They're Bruce's ultimate weakness.

Meanwhile, in Nanda Parbat:

Assassin: I have good news and bad news.
Talia: What's the good news?
Assassin: Jason finally stopped reading The Count of Monte Cristo.
Talia: oh good —
Assassin: But now he's finished The Princess Bride and is drafting a thirty-page thesis on why Inigo Montoya's character arc is not only epic but sane and well-adjusted.
Talia: ...There it is.
Assassin: I'm now his beta reader? And it's actually a great essay?
Talia *sighs*: hand it over. Let's see how good his Arabic is.

Mother Knows Best

Chapter Summary

Tim's lack of human understanding is becoming a problem.

Luckily, he knows an expert on the subject: Janet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Training a hoard was hard.

Training the Waynes was *impossible.*

Tim had new respect for Janet. Getting Jack to the point of resigned acceptance he was at was nothing short of a miracle. Humans were way too attached to their morals.

See Exhibit A: Bruce and murder.

Tim had been attacked, so he fought back. He and the Waynes both agreed that was a good thing, but apparently, continuing to mutilate the man and trying to eat his arm after he passed out from shock was where they drew the line. Even *Alfred* said Tim needed to know when to pull back. *Alfred.* The world had gone mad.

They didn't budge, not even when Tim pointed out that Batman seriously injured people all the time. Dick had even flatlined the Joker and put him in the ICU before Tim had become Robin and decided to avenge Jason. Nobody had gotten mad at *him.*

(Bruce and Dick had shuffled awkwardly, muttering that yes there *had* been shouting matches and much emergency therapy, but that was beside the point.)

No, the point was that *they'd* all gone berserk, spreading blood and mayhem across the city, and Tim deserved a turn too.

"We're not getting rid of the no-killing rule," Bruce said firmly, "every person, no matter how twisted, deserves a chance to redeem themselves."

"But what if I'm really hungry?" Tim asked.

"No."

Tim pouted. That was just unfair. Batman was a killjoy. He'd better watch out, his status as favorite hoard member was on thin ice.

Even worse than the no-kill rule were the addendums to Bruce's code.

"You don't have addendums!" Tim said in disbelief.

Bruce slapped a list onto the fridge. "I do now. You'll follow these, or no more Robin."

Tim glared at the list, hating it with every fiber of its being. There were only three items on it, but that was two more rules than before and *that* had already been too much.

No killing

No maiming

No cannibalism

It was outrageous. What was Tim supposed to do, pat rogues on the head and say "bad human?" He wasn't Batman. Everyone knew Robin was the savage one in the duo. Bruce was even making him promise to only use his bo staff on patrol like he didn't trust Tim with his own claws.

Tim did not know he had the capacity to feel this insulted until now. That’s it, Alfred was now the favorite. The butler would never do this to him.

It was all Jack’s fault. He’d turned Bruce against him. Tim had been Robin for over a year without these annoying restrictions, but as soon as Jack started chatting with him — *wham* , the helicopter parenting quadrupled. Coincidence? Hardly. They were all ganging up to make him miserable.

"But Bruce, I have to eat," he pressed, "I’m almost due for a growth spurt!”

All those delicious criminals running around were just begging him to take a bite out of them. They didn't need *all* their limbs, and Tim needed all the calories he could get before his first molt. That was coming up soon… ish. Probably. Maybe. Eventually.

"I'm sure you will survive just fine," Bruce said, "Alfred would be upset if you ate people instead of his cooking."

He nodded pointedly to the boring, normal toast Alfred had made for breakfast. Tim scowled at it. Butter? Who was satisfied with mere butter?

Tim begrudgingly took a bite, but only after adding Hershey’s syrup to it for flavor. "Fine, but can I at least kill the Joker? I won't even eat him."

Tim had a strong immune system, but even he would probably die of food poisoning if he ate that piece of garbage.

Bruce's eyes twitched in consideration before he sighed and shook his head. "No, if I let you do that you'll use it as a loophole for the next set of victims."

"I prefer to call them free meals," he said, "and Joker deserves it."

Bruce rested a hand on Tim's head and ruffled his hair. "I can't argue with that. But it's bad enough we play judge and jury. I won't add executioner to the list. Sometimes the only way to stay human is to follow rules like these. I'm scared of what we'd lose if we crossed that line."

He left the kitchen, conversation over.

It was a really inspiring speech. If Tim had been human he might even have bought into it, but as far as he was concerned, dead was dead. Morals had nothing to do with it. Why didn't Bruce's silly code not understand that?

***

Over the next several days Tim continued to protest the new rules but was overruled by his humans. This was speciest. He deserved the right to murder at will!

The more he argued this, the more hyper-vigilant Bruce and Dick got on patrol. They would barely let him into any brawls or streetfights at all now. It was almost worse than their coddling. Tim was quickly losing patience.

He needed professional help.

So, while Bruce and Dick were locked in the study for an emergency Zoom call about dragon ethics or some other nonsense Jack claimed to be an expert in, Tim grabbed his cell phone and called his mother.

His scheme was flawless because Janet only kept a cell phone to keep tabs on Jack. She'd only used the call function once in Tim's entire life. Nobody would suspect Tim of initiating contact with her directly.

Not that they'd ever find out about this call. The humans were too busy panicking over dragon care or whatever. He loved that they were friends, but they bonded over the dumbest things. Dragon care. Pfft. Dragons could take care of *themselves.*

It was looking after humans that was hard.

The phone clicked and Janet's dry voice crackled from the other end. "Child of mine, why do you torment me?"

"Because you're the only one who can help me," he said. "Hoard problems."

She grunted that she was listening. Tim explained his situation as she ate something messy in the background. It sounded squelchy with a pleasant crunch. Great, now Tim was peckish.

"—And I just don't get why it's a big deal," he finished. "What's wrong with a little murder among family?"

It was a conundrum that had been bothering him since infancy. Jack was like this too and there was no logical reason for it. Tim was out of his depth.

Janet sighed into the speaker. "Let me tell you a secret, Hatchling."

He blushed at the endearment. "Yeah?"

"Humans are silly creatures and they will *never* make sense."

Tim scoffed. "I know *that."*

Janet hummed noncommittally. "Not when it comes to your hoard. One moment."

She switched to video. Tim waved as she balanced the phone against a tree trunk. Janet was human again, drenched Carrie-style in blood and looking very well-fed. There was a dense jungle behind her and the mangled fur of an animal Tim couldn't identify at her feet. She sat cross-legged in front of the camera and cocked her head at him in a birdlike way.

"I always forget that your human blood occasionally confuses your instincts," she said. "Perhaps it is a good thing I am your teacher, although I have been shirking my duties to teach you of our kind."

"You don't have those duties," Tim reminded her. Janet had already done more than her fair share raising him, she didn't need to worry about this too. "And my instincts are fine. They've got me."

She snorted. "Do they?"

He stuck his tongue out at her. Just because he cried when Jason died did *not* make him as human as Jack. That was just rude.

"Regardless of that, your hoard is made of humans. Instincts will not help you with them," she said. "They are fussy things; helpless, sentimental, delicate, and difficult to manage."

She wrinkled her brow. "It's those *emotions* of theirs always making them distressed and causing trouble. I have no idea how they survive on their own."

Oh, Tim could relate. Alfred was the only sensible one here, but even he was so painfully soft and sweet that Tim just wanted to wrap him up in a blanket and hide him in the Batcave forever. Actually, he wanted to do that to all the Waynes. They were too precious and innocent to survive on their own.

"They don't understand the world like we do," Janet said sagely, "your duty as their dragon is to keep them safe. Sometimes, that means letting them have their way."

"What, like compromising?" Tim said.

"I suppose," Janet said, "more like humoring their silly tendencies. Why else do you think I kept you? Jack was very determined."

That actually explained a lot.

Tim leaned back and drummed his fingers against the table. "So… even if it's stupid and doesn't make sense, I should do what they want so they'll stay happy?"

"Within reason," Janet said, "they are very high maintenance, but sometimes it is easier to let them think they are in control than fighting them on it. It's our job to keep our hoards safe, so if it accomplishes that…"

"Then it doesn't matter how dumb they are," Tim said, clapping his hands together. “Wow Mom, you're a genius!"

Janet preened. "I imagine that after all these years, no other dragon knows as much about humanity as I do. I am a leading expert."

"So true," Tim said. "Do you think I’ll be as wise as you someday?"

“In a few decades perhaps,” she said, “you have much to learn.”

Tim nodded. Janet was so knowledgeable and wise. He was so glad she was part of his life. What would he even do without her?

"I know exactly how to fix this now. Thanks, Mom!" Tim told her, then added a quick growl as a goodbye as he hung up.

In Dragonic it basically meant "leave before I disembowel you" but it was the nicest goodbye their language had. Janet was probably blushing on her end. Good thing the blood would hide that.

***

When Bruce said he wanted to talk to Tim in the Batcave that afternoon, he was prepared. Tim had Motherly Advice on his side, nothing could go wrong.

"I spoke with your father earlier," Bruce said, kneeling so he and Tim were eye level, "he reminded me that you have a… very different view of the world than most people. I want you to know that I respect that, but there are some things I cannot abide if you're going to work with me, okay?"

Tim nodded. Bruce took a deep breath and continued.

"People always deserve a second chance," he said. "We don't have the right to deny them that. Killing is… too final. Too much like pretending to be God. It's something I can't bring myself to do because I would never stop."

Tim didn't see what God had to do with death (everything in the world died regardless of the deities) but he kept quiet. Mostly.

"What about people like the Joker?" He asked. "You brought him back."

It was an act so illogical Tim couldn't begin to start unraveling it. Why go to the effort of killing someone only to undo it?

Bruce sighed and glanced at the ceiling.

"I…I hate that man. I *want* him dead," he confessed. He clenched his fist so hard the knuckles creaked. "But I cannot aid, allow, or assist in his demise. It would eat away at me. If I let myself give into that temptation it will destroy who I am. Make it easier for me to throw away *other* lives. I would be no better than him. And besides that…"

Bruce took Tim's hand and squeezed it. "You didn’t see what flatlining Joker did to Dick. Bringing that madman back was selfish but the guilt would have driven him mad. It would have been more convenient to let the Joker die . . . but I wanted my son to be okay more than I wanted that man to suffer. I'm sorry if that lowers your opinion of me but — "

Tim interrupted Bruce by patting his head.

He had to bite back a laugh at the bewildered look on B's face.

"Don't worry, B," he said, "I get it. I want Dick to be happy too."

When Bruce put it the way he did, it made more sense. Tim would move heaven and earth to keep his hoard alive. Rationality was irrelevant when you loved someone. Just look at Janet and Jack for proof of that.

From what Tim knew about those dark months before he became Robin, Dick had been almost as unstable as Bruce. Now he was better, but Tim was sure that wouldn’t be the case if he felt guilty (even if there was no reason to be sad about killing a monster). Bruce had chosen to be selfish for someone he loved, and Tim couldn’t fault him for it.

"I don't really understand everything about morals," Tim said, "but if following them makes you happy. I'll do it, Bruce. You're just as special to me as Dick is to you."

Tim was already used to avoiding the other red meat because of Jack. He could do it for B and Dick too, even if it was a bummer. He would do absolutely anything for them.

Bruce had a watery, soft look in his eyes. It made Tim uncomfortable because this was a very *emotional* moment, but he remembered what Janet said. He didn't have to understand everything, he just had to tolerate it. Sometimes being a good hoard keeper meant meeting these silly humans where they were at, even if it gave him hives.

Tim braced himself, then reached forward and hugged Bruce, squeezing him tightly like Jack always did. After a second of shock, Bruce placed his hands on Tim's back too.

"Want to hear a secret. B?" Tim whispered, "you have to promise never to tell anyone."

"Okay champ," B said.

Tim leaned over and said as quietly as he could into Bruce's ear so no other hoard members would hear. "You're my favorite. I'll do anything you want as long as it makes you happy. Promise."

Bruce's returning hug suddenly became much, much tighter. Tim "oofed!" as he lost a lot of the air in his lungs. Luckily, dragons could hold their breath for a long time.

He nuzzled into Bruce's shoulder, soaking up all this strange affection, for once not minding it. Something deep inside him relaxed to know that he could take care of his hoard emotionally too.

Janet had been right. These people really were silly, but they were *his* . Tim would put up will all their strange little habits so long as it kept them smiling.

***

That night, Tim opened up his laptop and logged onto his Plots and Schemes folder.

He'd put a lot of thought into these things and he was sad to nix so many, but there were too many plans that were no longer viable.

When the Waynes found out he was a dragon, Tim toyed with the idea that they could all kill the Joker together. It would be easy and fun — a perfect bonding activity! — and would negate the need for all the coding he was making for Oracle's Arkham defenses.

But now it was obvious that would never work. The Waynes were too sensitive for this mission. They really were a bunch of bleeding hearts. Tim refused to involve them further in this.

As for Oracle, Tim suspected Babs could be swayed to help him, but even if she did she might still be upset or guilty. She was a sneaky human who pretended to always be fine even when she wasn't. Tim was suspicious of her mental health; no way was it as good as she said it was. He'd read *all* those domestic hotline articles for her, so he knew a thing or two about trauma and was taking no chances with hers.

No, Janet was right. Tim had to keep them safe, including from their own bad habits. So it fell once again to Tim to avenge Jason alone.

This changed nothing. He still had his partial hack of Arkham and years of simmering rage. All this meant was that he had to plan his break-in even more carefully.

The Bats could never know who murdered Joker for their own good, and Tim would make sure they wouldn't, even if it killed him.

Chapter End Notes

Janet: After twenty years of ignoring Jack, I'm an expert on everything human.
Tim: I believe everything you tell me without question. Clearly, you are the most intelligent being I'll ever meet. 🤩

Meanwhile, in the Himalayas.

Jason: Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more—well, NOT THIS PLAYER! Prepare to die, scum!
screams, explosions, general chaos
Instructor: We really need to do something about his monologues before he goes in for the kill.
Talia: Oh no, this is already an improvement. He kept it to less than a stanza this time. I'm so proud.

*Quote is from Macbeth by Shakespeare

Real Heroes Join the PTA

Chapter Summary

Dick finds his calling in life.

Chapter Notes

Me *frantically waving a broom as I'm surrounded by commenters chanting JASON JASON JASON*: No, get back! Away with thee! You'll get him when you get him! STOP TRYING TO MANIFEST HIM!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were perks to living with the Waynes. Tim could walk on whatever side of the hallway he wanted, scent the entire manor as his, and be honest about his dragon side with people other than Jack for the first time *ever.* That was pretty awesome. Bruce even encouraged Tim to transform down in the cave and practice flying. The bottomless pit was a great place to work on his dives and Tim ended up spending hours in the crevasses snacking on bats. He and Janet also got along much easier now that there were no evil family reunions hanging over their heads, which meant their mutual hobby of sabotaging Jack's return to Gotham was for fun now rather than necessity.

(He was very glad he didn't have to use any of his emergency plans for if Janet got too aggressive. Making a fake uncle would have been fun, but the paperwork sounded boring and Jack would have freaked out.)

So yes, it was great. Well, mostly. He still had those awful "how to be human" classes that Dick was insisting on continuing in Jack's stead, and was being forced to learn furniture repair from Alfred since he kept breaking the antiques, but those were lesser evils compared to compulsory human education, so Tim wasn't complaining.

Except that Tim had made a mistake. A grave, grave mistake.

Well, no, that was a lie. *Jack* made a mistake. He accidentally signed a custody clause that put the Waynes' in charge of Tim's education. Bruce had snuck it into a business deal with Drake Industries in a footnote via email and Jack hadn't noticed until it was too late.

So. Tim was in a pickle. Stupid Parent-teacher conferences. Stupid report cards. Stupid Dick for caring about both of them.

“What do you mean your highest grade is a C+?” Dick said, tearing through Tim’s graded assignments as they did a performance review in the manor library. “You’re one of the smartest people I know but somehow you’re even failing P.E. That shouldn’t even be possible! Is being Robin taking too much of a toll?”

Tim shrugged. “Nah, school is boring, is all.”

The teachers repeated the same five things for hours and assigned pointless tasks to keep them all busy. Tim had learned early in life that his time was better spent sleeping through the lectures. It helped that Jack didn't have high standards anymore. As long as Tim didn’t skip classes or bite someone’s fingers off, his dad was happy.

Dick pressed his face against a math quiz that only had two questions filled in and groaned. “I can’t believe I’m saying this to you of all people Tim, but you have to pay more attention to your education. It’s important.”

“Maybe for *you,”* Tim said, chewing on his pencil. "I couldn't care less."

He’d suffer through high school for Jack, but no amount of torture, begging, or bribes would convince him to go to college. He already knew everything he needed to about surviving, and Bruce and Babs were helping him with the vigilante stuff. Everything else was a waste of time.

“Don’t eat that,” Dick said, snagging the pencil out of Tim’s mouth. Tim pouted. The graphite was the best part. “We need to get your grades up.”

“It won’t work,” Tim said. “Trust me, it’s better for everyone if I don’t try.”

The last time he’d applied himself to an assignment (a self-insert fanfiction of graphically murdering and cannibalizing the Joker for his English class) Jack had to donate twenty grand to the school and bribe the counselor with a Hawaiian getaway to stop them from giving Tim a mandatory psyche eval.

“Tim, your IQ is off the charts and you are a natural detective,” Dick said, weirdly serious, “there’s no way you can’t get all A’s if you put in the work. Do it for me, okay?”

Tim sighed. “Okay, fine.”

It could be Dick’s early birthday/Christmas/good hoard member present. Honestly, the things he did for these people. Besides, finals were next week. Tim could hang in there until then.

“Great!” Dick beamed like the sun baby from Teletubbies, “I’ll help you. What are you working on now?”

Tim held up his copy of Lord of the Flies. “I have to write an essay about this for my final. It’s worth, like, half my grade.”

“Ah, a classic. What do you think so far?”

Tim flipped to the middle of the book, dredging up the Sparknotes he’d skimmed at the beginning of the semester. “I think they should eat Piggy. He has the ideal fat ratio and would be delicious roasted. Chasing after the boars is fun, but it’s smarter to cut down on their own numbers first so they need less resources. Honestly, if there was only one human left it’d be perfect… Dick, you okay?”

Dick was rubbing his hands against his temples, looking a second away from screaming.

“Oh yeah, I’m doing great,” he said, “just thinking about how much we’re going to have to go over. Your teachers’ comments make a lot more sense now.”

The report card was peppered with phrases like *“this child urgently needs therapy,” “alarming hostility toward classmates,”* and (Tim’s personal favorite) *“somehow manages to unnerve the entire class even while asleep.”*

“You should have seen my elementary school ones,” Tim grinned, “they were even better.”

It really was impressive how much better he was at acting normal compared to then, but it made for some very boring end of the year reports. 6th grade had been wild.

Dick pulled out his phone and started furiously typing.

“Who’re you texting?” Tim asked.

“Babs. We’re going drinking later. I don't want to be sober any longer than I have to. As soon as 8 PM hits I’m replacing my blood with vodka.”

Tim nodded sympathetically. Dick must be getting flashbacks to his time in horrible, human school-jail. Educational facilities really were the worst. Tim really felt for him.

He patted Dick's head again.

It was unclear whether or not it helped.

***

Fortunately, Dick’s enthusiasm bounced back quickly. Either Babs had talked some sense into him or he’d found another delusion to chase. Either way, whatever PSTD he had from his days in school was reburied and he was back to his usual, chipper self in no time.

Unfortunately for Tim, this meant Dick obsessively living up to his promise to tutor Tim and save his grades from abysmal subpar performance. The entire week before finals was spent cramming and being forced into actually contributing to his group projects.

Tim wasn’t sure what scared his classmates more; the fact that Tim was their partner in the first place, or that he was now actually interacting with them. One of the jocks from Social Studies almost fainted when Tim asked if he’d finished his part of the presentation (he hadn’t.)

More than one teacher pulled him aside to ask if he was okay because he was staying awake in class for the first time in two semesters. Most of them avoided eye contact, even when speaking directly to him. Tim grumbled something about living up to expectations and tried not to squirm. It was very uncomfortable for everyone involved. Tim was annoyed. He'd based his entire school personality off glaring as harshly as possible at anything that moved, and now all that was in jeopardy.

But he was doing this for Dick, who had self-care as bad as Bruce but was better at hiding it. He deserved good things, so Tim persevered and managed to get most of his grades up to B-'s and Cs by the end of the semester by sheer stubbornness.

The things he did for these people.

When Tim told his dad that he almost had a 3.0 GPA, Janet had to pin him to the floor and threaten to fire their intern to stop him from racing back to Gotham to celebrate.

"You don't understand, Jan, I've been praying to multiple deities for this to happen!" Jack cried. "It's a miracle!"

"It's a piece of paper, it doesn't mean anything!" she replied.

"Actually, it's all digital," Tim said.

"Then it's even more nonsensical. Jack, stop this. We're not going home. *Jack!"*

She ended up breaking Jack's phone in half so he couldn't use the Delta app. Thank goodness for Janet's resourcefulness. The last thing Tim wanted was a hug and a heart-to-heart about education.

Not that he ended up escaping that, in the end. Dick was unstoppable when he wanted to cuddle. That kind of invincibility should be illegal, and Bruce was useless. He enabled Dick and said it was good for Tim to be less touch-starved. The implication that he needed a daily dose of hugs was insulting. Tim was almost fifteen and a fire-breathing killing machine to boot. What part of *dragon* did they not understand?

Oh well, this was just another cultural miscommunication. Jack was also like this; he and Janet were locked in a war of attrition to change each other's love language. It was unclear who was winning, but Tim was holding out for Janet.

Anyway, at least Dick was happy. He was so proud of himself for fixing TIm's perfectly good GPA. His ego was so inflated that Tim kept expecting him to float.

"I'm joining the PTA in the fall," he said over dinner. "I'm going to *own* those bakesale brownies."

"But you're not even a parent," Tim said, completely lost.

"And look how amazing I am at this already!" Dick countered. "By the time I have kids of my own, I'll be a super mom."

"Don't you mean dad?"

"I said what I said."

Tim looked at Bruce, who just shrugged and went back to composing an email to Jack. Tim was pretty sure it had another thinly veiled attempt to get full custody.

"This house is insane," Tim muttered. "Human evolution was a mistake."

Alfred refilled Tim's water cup. "I'm afraid that has always been the case, young sir. Now, finish your raw liver. You're looking pale."

Tim sighed and acquiesced. He'd finally gotten his appetite back after four days of nausea, so now they had him on an iron-heavy diet. Not his favorite, but it could be worse.

Tim slathered more blue funfetti frosting and vinegar on his food and set to work, pointedly ignoring Dick as he compared dessert recipes with Alfred.

Usually, humans found a mate before obsessing over children, but proximity to Bruce messed that up for Dick. He didn’t even have a girlfriend; then again, it was just like a Bat to cut out the middleman.

Tim would just leave him to it. Not his circus, not his monkeys.

Chapter End Notes

Tim: Literature is stupid. School is obsolete! I'm going to live in the woods and be a gremlin and none of you can stop me!
Dick: YOU WILL DO YOUR HOMEWORK OR SO HELP ME

Meanwhile:
Assassin *slips into a room full of other assassins*
Jason: You weren't followed?
Assassin: No, the area is secure.
Jason: Excellent. Then let's get started. Everyone pull out your copy of Emma, we have a lot of cover today.
nerd assassins cheer
Jason: This is the best day of my second life. This book club is going to be so lit. 😎

One Steph Forward, One Steph Back

Chapter Summary

Ever wonder where Steph's been?

She's been pissed off and now you get to find out why.

😀

Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday Tim, may god have mercy on your soul.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim was leaping over a building when he was accosted by a flying Eggo thrown directly at his face. It landed with a squelch and sent him flailing into the nearest railing. Luckily, he caught himself so his landing didn’t have the same sound effect.

His attacker stood on the next rooftop. Her purple cape billowed ominously behind her and the white cutouts of her mask narrowed in concentration as she prepared to chuck another frozen pastry at him.

"Spoiler!" Tim said excitedly.

"Robin," she replied, “we meet again. Think fast!”

She launched the Eggo, then followed it up with six more. Tim ducked and pivoted as they splatted on the ground behind him.

"Oh come on, stop dodging," Steph said, "let me give you your birthday present!"

Tim jumped and twisted until he could hop onto her rooftop, grinning wildly and only partially coated in Aunt Jemina syrup. Then he kicked the box of pastries out of her hands. It fell into the alley below.

Steph and Tim both paused as they heard someone yell in excitement, grab the box, and run away into the darkness chanting “Eggo, Eggo, Eggo!”

Spoiler and Robin stared after them until they vanished into the woodwork with their prize, only slightly bewildered. Could that have been Steph’s doppelganger?

“Welp, there goes your birthday present,” Steph said. “Sucks to be you, Boy Wonder.”

“It’s OK, I think they’ll enjoy it more than me,” Tim said, wiping syrup off his face. “Besides, my birthday isn’t until tomorrow.”

“Whatever, you needed an Eggo to the face today, so I improvised,” Steph said.

Tim grinned. It was always a good day when Steph threw things at him. They *never* talked anymore; the lack of unmalicious violence was bumming him out.

“Thanks, you’re the best,” Tim told her, “we need to hang out more often.”

He missed his almost-hoard-borderline/kind-of-ex-girlfriend-confusing-human. Steph was a light in his life. An on-fire, angry flashlight that shone directly into his eyes, and Tim missed her brilliance. Dick never threw Eggos at him. How was Tim supposed to keep his reflexes keen without random projectiles being hurtled at him?

Spoiler sniffed, avoiding eye contact with Tim. “I dunno, you think you can stand to be around me?”

Wait, what?

“Uh, *yeah,”* Tim replied, completely lost. The few times he’d seen her, Steph had been weird like this, always grumbling under her breath and glaring at him. Tim appreciated her natural aggression, but he was confused about *why* it was directed at him.

Oh well. Females were always angry. It was their defining trait, just look at Janet. Tim was glad Steph could tap into hers so much.

“Speaking of which,” he continued, “want to hang out tomorrow?”

She squinted at him. “Why?”

Because Dick was obsessed with planning the “perfect” birthday, but obviously it wouldn’t be perfect without Steph there to be crazy with him. She brought an element of chaos to life that Tim desperately needed more of.

And, besides . . .

“I missed you,” he told her, and gave a wide grin.

Dragons worked well long distance, but the more they cared about someone the harder it was to leave them be. Tim got antsy when he couldn’t keep tabs on his hoard, and even though Steph wasn’t officially his he didn’t like losing track of her. If *Tim* was feeling that, then Steph was probably even worse off. Humans were much more social than dragons, after all.

Hmm, maybe Steph was mad because Tim had been giving her *too* much space since their kind of breakup?

“Really? You actually want to hang out with me?” Steph sounded nervous and unsure. That wasn’t like her.

“Of course!” Tim assured. “It wouldn’t be the same without you!”

A day running around Gotham out of costume would fix that. It'd be a win-win for both Tim and Steph and it was going to be *awesome.*

***

Eighteen hours and a whole day of partying later and Tim could confirm that it was indeed awesome. Dick took his planning role very seriously, especially since Jack couldn't come back to Gotham this June (thank you Janet. Shredding their passports had been a big brain move). Tim had heard legends of Titans Fiestas and was happy to say they did not disappoint. . . Although nobody had told Tim how exhausting nonstop celebrating was.

A birthday sunrise followed with a fun breakfast, topped off with driving lessons for the Redbird motorcycle Bruce got Tim, plus running around Gotham all morning *and* having lunch at a five-star restaurant was a lot, even for Tim.

And that had just been the morning. They were visiting theme park after trampoline park and museum, and Tim's sense of time was delineating into a smear of sleepiness. It was now three P.M. and Tim was ready to pass out.

"Noob, you need to get out more. You're way too introverted," Steph said as they exited Amusement Mile. She had a tall cone of vanilla soft serve peppered with gummies. Somehow, she didn't even look tired. "This is nothing."

"No, you're just crazy," Tim said, blinking vertigo away. He'd fallen asleep on the rollercoaster and it had messed with his sense of balance.

Humans. Boundless wells of energy, they were. Tim's respect for them grew.

"You're just weak sauce. This just proves that I'm crazy hot and way too good for you," Steph huffed. "You're lucky I even came with you. You know, most people don't invite their exes out for a day on the town."

"Well, I do. I just can't believe you're still mad," Tim said. "It's been a year."

“You were a jerk!”

“I was?”

Steph gave him a glare worthy of Babs, who could be scarier than Batman. “Tim, you told me you would rather castrate yourself than go out with me. You know what that does to a girl’s self-esteem?”

Tim did not, because he wasn’t a girl nor was he human. All Steph had talked about back then was honesty in relationships, so he’d been honest. Why was she mad that he did what she wanted?

“By the confused look on your face, I’m guessing you don’t,” she grouched. “Tim, you’re an absolute moron. I knew this was a mistake.”

“Hey, just because I’d rather claw my skin off than go on a date doesn’t make me stupid,” Tim retorted. “Romance is a lie and love is a scam used by corporations to sell anatomically incorrect organs to the masses. Refusing to buy into it doesn’t make me stupid. In fact, you should be thanking me for saving us from its evil claws!”

Steph looked like she’d just stepped on gum while wearing socks. “Thanking you? For turning me down in the most brutal way ever?”

“Yeah,” Tim said, training (and failing) to recall what had been brutal about last year’s sort of breakup thing, “it stopped you from sucking on my face, so I think it did the job. Now we are both freed from pure suffering. You’re welcome.”

“Yeah, *thanks.”*

Steph punctuated that statement of gratitude by shoving her ice cream cone in his face.

“For the record, that was sarcasm,” she snapped. “Happy birthday, Boy Wonder. I hope you choke on your cake.”

She stomped off, hair fizzing in every direction. Tim stared after her as melted dairy dripped down his face, unsure of what to do. After a few minutes, Dick got back with a couple of churros.

“Woah, what did I miss?” He asked. “Where’s Steph?”

Tim wiped ice cream off his face, looked contemplatively at his hand, then licked it off. “She went home. I think she might sneak into the manor to re-steal my Eggos for revenge.”

“Why?” Dick asked, pulling a pack of baby wipes out of his man-purse.

Tim grabbed them before Dick started trying to dab them on his face like some weird preschool parent and scrubbed off the last of the ice cream (along with several gummy worms) with a sigh. “Dunno, she was pretty mad.”

“ . . . what did you do?” Dick asked.

Tim frowned at his hoard member. “Nothing. Why do you always think it’s my fault?”

Dick just gave him a look. OK, point taken.

“I think I insulted her,” Tim admitted, “but I’m not sure how. Girls are hard to understand.”

Human social conventions were hard enough as it was. Teenage ones were even worse.

Dick handed him a new ice cream cone. “Amen to that, baby bird, but Steph is probably in the right. She’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“You’re just saying that because she likes glitter as much as you do,” Tim grumbled.

“That’s definitely a point in her favor,” Dick agreed. “But she also has common sense, which you don’t.”

“I do!”

“You also forget people see the world differently than you do,” Dick continued. “I bet you and Steph are on completely different pages… if not separate books.”

Tim tilted his head. Was that it? A misunderstanding? Surely Steph was well aware of the horrors of romance. As a fellow teen, it would be a gauntlet she was well acquainted with . . . but then again, *she* hadn’t been forced to watch 3 seasons of Paradise Island with Dick. It was possible that she still had some of her innocence left.

“Oh,” he muttered, “I think I’m starting to see where I went wrong.”

There was a minuscule chance she thought he didn’t like her. Well, that was unacceptable. He’d have to be clearer with her. Tim didn’t dislike Steph, just human courtship rituals, but he could see how that was confusing.

“Next time you see her, say sorry and try to mean it,” Dick told him. “Otherwise, I’ll sic Babs on you.”

Tim nodded, already calculating how many bricks would be thrown at his face before he could even get the words out.

***

Once they got home, Tim changed into un ice-creamed clothes and wandered down to the dining room. Dick had insisted that homemade birthday dinners were superior, which Tim was very grateful for. He didn’t think he could have gotten through another five-star restaurant without throwing himself out a window.

Bruce was the only one in the dining room, but that worked in Tim's favor. Tim needed his human knowledge, otherwise he'd never get another Eggo thrown at him again.

"B, you're smart," Tim said, "how do you apologize to women?"

Bruce froze like a deer in headlights. "Um."

"You've dated dozens of ladies. No, hundreds!" Tim continued. "You're a master of failed romance, so you're probably great at the whole groveling thing."

There *had* to be one relationship in that sea of supermodels and gold diggers that ended in platonic friendship.

Bruce looked like somebody had tried to feel him koala bile, but Tim wasn't alarmed. Bruce looked like that a lot these days.

"How was your birthday?" Bruce asked desperately, avoiding eye contact.

"Fine. Now tell me about dating," Tim said. Steph's violent affection was on the line. He wouldn't be distracted.

Bruce swallowed and reached for a morning newspaper that wasn't there. Alas, it was too late in the day to hide behind his paper wall, and Dick showed that moment to appear.

"Did someone say dating?" he asked.

"Oh God," Bruce groaned.

"You're not allowed to talk to me about romance," Tim told Dick, "I'm asking *Bruce."*

It was hard to tell if Dick's choked cough was a gag or a laugh. His face was a mix of horrified and delighted.

"Oh my gosh," Dick said, "are you serious? This is amazing."

"Who wants cake?" Bruce said, "I think we should have cake."

"All in good time, dear boy," Alfred said as he set down their entrees. "But first, dinner. While we eat, why don't regale us on the finer points of flirting. It *is* Master Tim's birthday, after all, and he's so excited to learn."

Well, not really, but Tim needed all the help he could get. He made his eyes as big as possible and smiled at Bruce.

The crime-fighting billionaire who regularly berated gods and defeated alien overlords groaned and crumpled like a piece of paper.

If only apologizing to Steph was as easy as getting Bruce to do what he wanted, but Tim had a feeling she'd be much harder to please.

***

Bruce's advice boiled down to "You're wrong no matter what. Accept that and grovel" which was also what Dick and Alfred said. Not the most self-gratifying answer, but Tim felt like he had enough sources to take this advice seriously. Alfred wouldn't lie to him. When he saw her on patrol, Tim would initiate a multi-step plan to get back into her good graces. Easy as pie!

Unfortunately, his plan didn't get off the ground. Mostly because Tim couldn't either.

"I told you mixing funfetti with raw meat was a bad idea," Dick said.

“It’s never made me sick before!” Tim said.

His grumbling was made weaker by how he was sprawled over the couch, hating existence. He didn’t think it was the food itself, he’d just eaten too much. He’d *thought* he was hungry, but his body had other plans. Other, nastier, more painful plans.

“You’ll have to stay home from patrol,” Bruce said, “Sorry champ.”

Tim banged his head against the couch cushion. It’d taken ages to convince Alfred to make Tim’s favorite recipe. He almost *never* got to eat vanilla-giblet-seaweed-oreo cake. This wasn’t fair! Unfair, cruel world. Couldn’t he catch a break on his birthday?

“But Killer Croc is out tonight,” he said, “I have to take him down.”

Taking a bite out of him was going to be his birthday present to himself. He’d had it all planned. Bruce wouldn’t even have found out!

“Tomorrow, kiddo,” Dick said, as if Croc would still be on the streets by then. “Focus on getting some rest. You pushed yourself pretty hard today, even without stomach problems.”

Bruce grunted in agreement, then spouted something ridiculous about Tim needing a “day off” and “time to relax.” Tim didn’t buy it. Clearly, this was another excuse for Bruce to get his daily dose of parenting in, even though Dick was his actual son and *right there.*

“If you’re going to mope, you might as well get started on drafting that apology to Steph,” Dick said. “Have a good night Timmy!”

Tim sprawled dramatically onto the floor as they walked off, muttering complaints in Draconic. Some birthday this was turning out to be.

***

Tim sulked on the couch for over an hour. He brooded for so long that Alfred straight-up gave up on him and went to bed. Obviously, raising Bruce gave him a sixth sense for battles he couldn't win, and a grumpy dragon was one of them.

So, Tim was now free to wallow without judgment. Unfortunately, brooding was boring without an audience, so Tim quickly stopped. He'd pick it back up again once patrol ended, but for now he needed something to do.

He still felt queasy, but it wasn't so bad. As long as he didn't eat anything else, he'd be fine.

. . . Of course, Janet always insisted the best way to overcome weakness was to face it head-on. Fight fire with fire, fight stomach aches with cake. Logically, it was sound.

Tim headed back toward the kitchen, mentally thanking Janet for the good advice. Perhaps his night could yet be salvaged.

***

Mother had failed him. Life was misery. Tim regretted everything.

Alfred was going to be so mad at him and Dick was going to cluck his tongue and sigh in disappointment. (Bruce wouldn't judge him, but only because Tim was going to rearrange the Batcomputer's desktop icons one space to the left. Bruce would be way too distracted fixing them to notice Tim on death's door.)

"Why did you have to be so delicious?" he grumbled at the sad remains of his birthday cake. Curse Alfred's cooking skills!

Tim sighed. He'd just have to endure the pain. His stomach felt like it had been twisted into a pretzel and run over by a tow truck, and his mouth tasted funny. It was going to be a tough night, even with Peptobismal on his side.

Luckily, he wouldn’t have to weather it alone. He had one final folk remedy to lean on in these trying times.

He piled the last two slices of Alfred’s human-safe banana cake onto a plate and pattered down the hall.

Physical contact was medicinal. Jack had been very insistent on that during Tim’s ‘how to be human’ classes. People always felt better when they got head pats, so it stood to reason the more physical contact they got the better the result would be. Tim wasn’t one for hugs, but emergency cuddles were valid.

All he needed was a human to curl up with and Tim would be right as rain in no time. Luckily, the random ninja girl in the attic gave the *best* hugs. Even if he wasn’t sick, Cass could cuddle him all she wanted and Tim would never complain.

Best secret hoard member *ever*.

Chapter End Notes

Tim, you little idiot. No wonder Steph is throwing waffles at you.

Gifts Tim got for his birthday!
From Dick -> A T-shirt that says "Always Be Yourself, Unless You Can Be a Dragon, Then Always Be a Dragon."
Alfred -> An entire cow from the local butcher
Bruce (as mentioned) -> a motorcycle. AKA the Redbird
Jack -> Plans for an amazing camping trip!
Janet -> A get-out-of-jail-free card from said camping trip.

Meanwhile:

Talia: Jason, did you start a regency romance book club in my father's assassin cult?
Jason: . . . No?
Talia: You're a terrible liar. I'm not angry, just--
Jason: disapointed, I know.
Talia: Yes. Why didn't you invited me!?
Jason: What?

Talia: You're reading Pride and Prejudice now. That is my favorite of Austen's work.
Jason: R-Really?
Talia: Yes, Mr. Darcy reminds me of your father when he was younger. It is a pleasant trip down memory lane.
Jason: . . . I can't believe it. You actually ruined that entire novel for me. Damn you, Talia. Damn you.

Warning! Spoiler Ahead

Chapter Summary

Welcome Cass, perfection incarnate and light of all our lives!

throws a wild Tim at her

Here's a psycho dragon for a little brother. Enjoy.

Chapter Notes

Coming up with chapter titles is the biggest ego check ever. is it funny? Does it make sense? Should I really base my entire personality around finding good ones? So humbling. I hate it. T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From what Tim gathered, Cass had been living in Wayne Manor for at least a week before he found her. Being able to hide from someone with enhanced senses was a terrifying and epic skill. Tim was very proud she'd already mastered it. In fact, if Tim hadn't been desperately avoiding Dick's well-intentioned but hellish tutoring at the time, he probably never noticed her.

Luckily, those nightmarish study sessions *had* happened, so Tim got a new hoard member. He'd been so fed up with memorizing historical dates and writing essay questions that he'd delved deep into the manor's halls and crawled into the walls in order to escape.

He'd been six feet into the vents and halfway through planning a false identity to use for the summer when he'd caught a scent.

It was unfamiliar and smelled like rain, shadows, and solitude.

Tim hadn't hesitated to follow it, and it led straight to the attic where a quiet Asian girl was hiding in the rafters, dressed in an old Gotham University sweater she'd probably stolen from one of the cardboard boxes.

There had been a moment where they were frozen, staring in surprise at one another; Tim, because there was an *entire human* in his nest that he hadn't noticed, and Cass because he'd actually found her, which people just didn't *do.*

Then she waved at him. It was a small, shy jerk of her hand followed by a tiny smile, signaling that she wasn't a homicidal maniac.

Affection slammed into Tim like a freight train.

His.

Tim had never had someone enter his hoard so quickly before. This must have been how Janet felt when she met Jack, minus the icky romantic bits. Tim knew that despite only knowing Cass for two seconds, he'd kill everyone on the planet and then himself if something happened to her.

Cass. Wonderful, sweet, perfect Cass had to be protected at all costs. It was Tim's sworn duty to devote himself to her wellbeing, despite the fact that she was better at fighting than anyone Tim had ever met and could look after herself just fine. (Just because she *could* didn't mean she should have to.)

Bruce didn't know about her, but that was because Bruce was oblivious. World's best detective, *sure.* But Cass's real claim to fame was that she was also in a game of hide and seek against Alfred *and was winning.*

(Tim was in awe. He hadn't known anything could escape the butler. Of course, if there ever was an exception, it would be Cass.)

In addition to her awesome stealth skills, Cass was also the only one Tim actively enjoyed being hugged by. Somehow she knew *just* how hard to squeeze and how long to cuddle. It was impossible to say no to her grabby hands, not that Tim *wanted* to. Even Janet wouldn't have been able to resist. (Note to self, keep Cass away from Janet. Mom would try to steal her.)

To sum up, Cass was amazing and he loved her, and obviously she'd been guided to Wayne Manor by some universal power so Tim could welcome her into his nest. It took all his self-control not to drag her downstairs and show her off to the rest of his hoard. They'd love her, he just knew it.

But Cass didn't want to, so Tim didn't.

For all her kick-butt awesomeness, Cass was super shy. She wasn't good at communicating, but Tim got the message when she body-slammed him away from the trap door and shook her head so fast her hair puffed into a halo.

No new people. Got it. Tim respected boundaries. Tim was *great* at boundaries.

Of course, the body slam led to questions like "Why are you living in Bruce's attic if you don't like strangers?" which were hard to get answers to when Cass had such a limited vocabulary, but eventually, through the power of body language, being platonic soulmates, and twenty questions, Tim got her story.

Apparently, Cass had been on the run from her bio-dad for years and she'd followed her instincts all the way to Gotham to get away from him. After a while, she'd seen Batman help some kids in an alley and knew he was safe-good-protector on instinct.

Like most humans, she for some reason wanted a responsible adult to look after her, so she'd almost revealed herself then and there, but Tim had shown up as Robin and she'd got cold feet. She'd been so heartbroken to realize that Bruce already had a kid that she'd slunk away to mope, despair, and hug a gargoyle. If Batman already had a kid, why would he want her?

Luckily, she'd spotted Nightwing a few days later and came to her senses. B had multiple children, therefore she could easily add herself to the family with no issue. Good Cass, she was so straightforward.

But again, shyness, her nemesis struck. On the 0.00000000000000001% chance Bruce *didn't* want her, Cass would be kicked out of the manor and separated from the family she'd mentally adopted. Unacceptable. Therefore she resorted to squatting.

Tim was certain that if he hadn't found her, Cass would have happily lived in their attic for years undiscovered. She enjoyed vicarious living and was stealthy enough to steal snacks without Alfred catching her *(respect)* that nobody else would have noticed her. It had already been three weeks and she still insisted on being a ghost in the manor, even though Tim was doing his best to coax her out.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to meet them?" Tim asked, poking at his slice of birthday cake. "They'll love you."

It was impossible not to adore Cass. Bruce would be a goner even before she KO'd him with her smile.

"No," Cass said, setting down her own plate. She pointed to a knothole in the floor that let her watch the hallways without being spotted. "This . . . ok. Better."

"But —"

"Want. Stay." She said. "With you."

She leaned into him and gave a gentle squeeze. Tim relaxed into her and finished his cake, ignoring the painful twist of his stomach. Why was it always emotions? They were humanity's best friend and worst enemy. Cass was perfectly safe. He knew she knew that so what was the — oh. *Oh.*

"I think I understand," Tim said sagely. It all made sense now. This was about emotions, yes, but that wasn't all.

Cass was still acclimating to her new territory. She needed time to understand the dynamics, space, and ideal nesting locations. And, of course, to be 110% sure that her presence wouldn't be contested by other residents, emotionally or physically. It didn't matter that she knew Bruce was good or that Tim had already accepted her, this was about survival tactics.

"Don't worry Cass," he told her, "your secret is safe with me."

If there was one thing Tim understood it was territory disputes. His whole life had been one, and if Cass needed time to ease herself into the hoard he would give it to her. After all, she was already one of his favorites.

The small smile she gave him was brighter than a thousand suns. They sat in the attic, eating birthday cake as rain started to pour outside. He was pretty sure he'd give her the world if she asked him to.

***

Tim was excellent at keeping secrets and this one was no different, although it helped that the Waynes were pretty oblivious. Cass's presence was as hidden as a polar bear in a snowstorm. If she didn't want to be seen she wouldn't be, and Tim just had to keep mum about how the attic was no longer just haunted.

That didn't mean he was leaving Cass to rot up there though. Tim brought her fluffy blankets, picture books, an etch-a-sketch, headphones for music, and lots of food. He even gave her his DS! Plus, Tim always grabbed an extra plate from dinner to take upstairs too, that way Cass wouldn't be denied the majesty that was Alfred's cooking.

Dick seemed to think he was having a growth spurt, but Tim wasn't due to shed for a while. He hadn't even had his first major molt. Honestly, did Dick even *read* the PDF? Tim was going to stay small a lot longer than his humans seemed to think.

"You know, if you don't want to meet them in person yet," Tim said one morning, "you could find other ways to say hello."

Cass was slumped against his shoulder as she practiced the alphabet. She cocked her head in confusion.

"Like," Tim grabbed a blank piece of paper and drew on it. "This? To show you belong with us."

Cass poked the stick figure drawing, eyes lighting with interest. It was a sketch of a vigilante suit made of pure black fabric so she could follow Tim on patrol and not be noticed by anyone else. Perfect for someone who liked to lurk in shadows.

“Want,” she said, poking it again. “Want. Gimme.”

Awesome, she was remembering the fun words now. Tim was so proud. Next up, swears.

But first, he had to figure out how to make Cass this Black Bat outfit. If all went well, it’d help Cass build her confidence so she’d be ready to face Dick’s sparkle aura and Bruce’s wall of impassive grunts. Maybe Steph could let him borrow her sewing machine?

He hummed, calculating how likely Steph was to even speak to him. He still had to apologize to her, after all.

“Hey Cass,” he said lightly, “how do you feel about bricks?”

***

Tim had to give credit where credit was due. Bruce was right; groveling had been a good move.

Spoiler stood on the edge of a skyscraper, her homemade cape flowing in the wind as she stared down at the city, a box of limited edition Eggos tucked under her arm. Another, emptier box was by her feet. Tim had most of its contents thrown at him over the last ten minutes, along with a smorgasbord of rooftop debris (including a couple bricks) while Steph vented about his lack of empathy, filter, and manners in general.

He’d smiled, nodded, and even paid attention. She’d made a lot of good points. Note to self; humans were very sensitive and shouldn’t always be tuned out, no matter how tempting it was.

Now Tim sat next to her, idly kicking his feet over the abyss below. He had a huge goose egg on his forehead and syrup coating half his Robin uniform, but that was a small price to pay for forgiveness and his new social knowledge.

“So, we good now?” he asked once she got it out of her system.

“The wound on my heart will never fully heal,” she said dramatically, “but I’ll hear you out. What is this favor you need help with?”

Finally. Hell really had no fury like a woman scorned.

Tim got to his feet and grinned. “Thanks, Steph! Okay, so there’s this girl —”

“A *what!?”*

Oh come on, what did he say this time?

***

It took much yelling, more thrown Eggos, and being chased across several rooftops, but in the end Steph had actually let him finish his sentence. She’d facepalmed when he told her (firmly, insistently, repeatedly) that Cass was *not* a crush or girlfriend because *no.* They were platonic soulmates cut from the same cloth. Emphasis on the platonic.

“I feel so stupid,” She groaned. “That was totally a jealous move right? Like, totally possessive? Mom said I can be ‘a bit much,’ but dangit, I thought I was over you.”

“You’re not stupid, and possessiveness is an admirable trait that you should be proud of,” Tim said. “But yeah, it would have been nice to finish my sentence.”

He had another goose egg because he tripped on his cape and fell down the fire escape they were now sitting on. It wasn’t Steph’s fault, but still, ouch.

“Still . . .” Steph groaned and banged her head against the iron railing, looking like she regretted many things. The action weirdly reminded Tim of Dick.

“Look, if I wouldn’t date you, what makes you think I’d date anyone else?” he said. “You’re the cream of the crop.”

“Is that . . . a compliment?”

Tim cocked his head. Why did she sound so suspicious? “Of course. I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, Steph. You’re awesome, I just don’t want to kiss you.”

Steph slowly looked up. “Really?”

Tim frowned. She sounded way too unsure. He’d been giving Steph space since turning her down, but apparently that’d been a mistake. Her self-esteem *had* taken a hit. This had to be fixed immediately.

“You’re one of the best people I know Steph. You’re tough, funny, brave, and a great friend. You even throw Eggos and bricks at me! Do you have any idea how awesome that is?”

Based on her bewildered expression, she didn’t. Honestly. And people said *he* was oblivious.

“The last thing you need is a boyfriend bringing you down,” Tim continued. “You deserve way better than the fate of a Hallmark heroine, Spoiler. You’re the *best.* ”

Sirens rang out behind them. Dick was swearing on the comms, and the horizon line was backlit by a fire from one of the abandoned factories by the dock, but their corner of Gotham felt quiet. Just him and Spoiler, feet swinging over a rusty fire escape in the bad part of town, banged up but still thriving.

“You really mean that?” She asked.

Tim nodded and smiled (no teeth). Steph’s shoulders loosened. He couldn’t see her face behind the mask, but Tim wondered if she was smiling back.

“Gosh Boy Wonder, why didn’t you tell me this a year ago?” she said. “I wouldn’t have been so petty if you’d just put it that way.”

“I thought you knew?” Tim said. In hindsight, that hadn’t been his best move, but he’d been young and foolish then. He was armed with better wisdom now.

Steph flung herself onto her back and the fire escape creaked dangerously. “You moron, I thought you hated me!”

“No, I don’t. My affection was obvious,” he retorted. “ . . . or, well, at least heavily implied.”

“IT REALLY WASN’T, TIM!”

She punched him on the shoulder and said he owed her a year’s supply of waffles for the emotional pain he’d put her through.

“Deal,” Tim said. Drake Industries could pay for that. Jack would be pleased that there was human-safe food being purchased on Tim’s credit card.

He laid down by Spoiler, already planning on when he could drag her to Crime Alley’s Waffle House. Things were finally fixed between them, so there was no way he was going to pass up the chance to hang out with her.

“So, Boy Wonder, tell me about this girl,” Steph said, nudging him with her elbow. “You’re not a couple, so what’s the deal?”

Tim grinned and nudged her back. “So glad you asked, Spoy. It all started on a dark and gloomy night . . .”

Scratch that. The three of them would go together and it would be perfect, just like it always was when his hoard was with him.

Oh.

Tim paused his story of meeting Cass to look sidelong at Spoiler. She'd pulled up her mask to blow bubble gum, both her shoes were untied, and her gloves were sticky with syrup.

"Come on Robin, don't keep me in suspense. She body-slammed you. What else? Because there's *no* way she stopped there. Your face is *way* too punchable," she joked.

Tim scoffed, but continued telling the story. A smile pulled at his lips the whole time, and he couldn't help but sneak more glances at Steph.

Hoard.

Yeah, that sounded right.

***

A few days later Cass clung to him as they waited outside a secondhand store for Steph. After the apology, it had taken hours to get all the syrup off his face and he still had a lump from the obligatory brick had thrown at him, but it was so worth it. Negotiations had been successful and Cass was officially meeting a new person, not to mention Steph officially becoming his hoard. (Their bond was made of violence and cemented with syrup and it would *never* break.)

"Oh my gosh, I'm so excited. Another girl!" Steph squealed. "It's about time. Come on, let's go find you some snazzy clothes to beat people up in!"

She grabbed Cass's hand and raced toward the thrift store. Cass smiled excitedly as she easily kept pace, quickly losing all the tension she'd previously had.

"Come on Boy Loser, get your rear in gear. We're going shopping!" Steph called, and then he was being dragged inside too.

Tim preened as he watched them pick out black jumpsuits, pants, hoods, jackets, socks, and so on for Cass's superhero costume. Cass was still too shy to say hi to the Waynes, but Steph was different. She was a *friend* , and even though Tim didn't need many of those he had a feeling Cass did.

Steph was a great one to start with. One of the best, if Tim was being honest. Even if she was a hopeless romantic.

Chapter End Notes

For those who are wondering, Tim decides who's in his hoard the same way I hyper-fixate on something: pure emotional attachment. There isn't a level he has to reach for something to "count" as hoard, it's just how much he cares about them. Zero science behind it, and no magic involved. Today just happened to be the day Tim worked through his and Steph's drama and realized that he cares a lot more than he previously thought. :)

Meanwhile

Jason:. . . And this is how you use tags for the search engine so you can find exactly what you want.
beta-reader assassin: This archive is so cool. How did I not know about this until now?
Jason: You were a padawan in need of a Jedi, but I got you bro. The Fanfic community welcomes you.
Beta-assassin: Heck yes! So worth hacking the league satellite for. Hey, is this your account?
Jason: Yeah I had to make a new one cuz Bruce follows my old one which is, you know, awkward—
Beta: WHY DOES YOUR MANSFIELD PARK COFFEE SHOP AU HAVE OVER 200K WORDS?!
Jason: I had a couple of long layovers. Anyway moving on, here's how you organize bookmarks properly—

Bat to Bat Communiation

Chapter Summary

Dick's mothering strikes again.

Luckily, Bruce is an amazing conversationalist.

Unluckily, it changes nothing.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all, sorry this is later than I usually post. In my defense, I was going to update this yesterday, but my car broke down on the highway, I had to careen through 3 lanes of traffic, and my car almost caught on fire. Turns out it can't be salvaged, so Jenny is dead. A moment of silence for her please. *sniff*

... On that note, I'm beginning to suspect I'm part of some Final Destination plot, because this is the second time in as many months that something has almost blown up on me. I'm just waiting for my boiler to blow at this point, or my apartment to get set on fire. So, like, if I don't update for a year it's probably safe to assume I'm dead? That just seems to be where I'm heading. Feel free to spam RavenGranger's inbox to see if I'm alive it it ever gets to that point. She knew this was a risk when she became my beta. (What's she gonna do, refuse my dying wish?)

Anyway, here's some more of Tim being Tim, Dick being Dick, and (almost) everyone suffering as a consequence. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next month, Tim got so busy helping Cass that he forgot a lot of other important things. One of those being Dick’s weird obsession with carrying on Jack’s humanness agenda.

Mostly, it manifested in him being overly involved in Tim’s education and social life. That was fine, seeing as how Dick had gone back to living in Bludhaven during the week and school was over, but Tim had underestimated him.

“Run that by me again,” Tim said to Bruce. “Nightwing wants *what?”*

Bruce didn’t look up from the bat computer. He was taking one of those free online typing tests. Tim suspected someone (the Flash) had said they were faster on a keyboard, so now Bruce had to prove them wrong.

“Nightwing proposed a protege day at Mount Justice,” Bruce said absently, selecting a time limit. “Each member with a successor, sidekick, or young partner is encouraged to introduce them to their peers in order to build camaraderie and network future allies. I want you to attend.”

Tim crossed his arms, highly suspicious. “Is this some kind of harebrained scheme for me to make more friends?”

Bruce didn’t answer, too busy hyper-focusing on the test as it began. His fingers flew across the keys and so far he had zero errors. Show off.

“I have plenty of friends *and* my hoard, I don’t need more.” Tim continued, glaring at the giant dinosaur. Oh, how he loathed that animatronic. One day he was going to destroy it, mark his words.

B grunted again, regressing to Bruce-isms to communicate. Tim, of course, understood him perfectly, and was *miffed.*

“Very funny, Mr. hypocrite, you *hate* people,” he said. It was one of Bruce’s charm points. “Why should I meet a bunch of humans when I already have the best ones at home?”

A hum.

“That’s splitting hairs. Fine, sentient beings, not humans. But my point stands.”

Bruce hunched further over his keyboard as the timer on the test clicked to single digits. He mumbled something offensive about the computer system under his breath. Tim threw his hands in the air.

“You did *not* just play that card with me. I don’t care how good of friends you are with them now, this is completely different —”

Bruce clicked his tongue.

“Okay, fine, it’s not,” Tim grumbled, “I just think Dick is being weird about this. Not everyone is a socialite. Dragons prefer solitude… But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to try if it’ll make Dick happy, just this once. I *do* tease him a lot, but only because he’s ridiculous. I bet he’d like feeling appreciated.”

Babs said he pushed himself because he was a people pleaser. Well, Tim wasn’t “people” but maybe Dick would take a break if Tim acted pleased.

Bruce slammed his finger down on the enter key as the timer hit zero. The computer made a happy sound and sent balloon animatics over the screen as Bruce’s 220 WPM achievement popped up with a happy jingle.

“Ha, take that, Flash!” he said.

“Good talk, B.” Tim said, “this was fun. We should do it again sometime.”

Tim ran up the stairs, done with talking for the foreseeable future. He’d have to get a look at the roster to see what heroes were showing up, seeing as how he had to *socialize* now. Yuck.

“Hn?” Bruce said, blinking owlishly as he looked up from the monitor, “Tim, were you still here? Tim?”

***

Never let it be said Tim didn't do awful things for his hoard, like attend *social events* .

Also never let it be said he didn't gripe, even when he resigned himself to suffering through them.

“Why can’t I bring Spoiler?” he asked as they got ready in the Batcave, “she’s a protege too, and super awesome. Probably a million times cooler than the dweebs everyone else is bringing.”

He hadn’t been able to find out who RSVPed. For all he knew, it would just be Green Lantern and a couple other losers in the Watchtower. He never should have agreed to this.

“If we bring Steph you won’t talk to anyone else,” Dick said bluntly, smoothing Tim’s cape. “The whole point of this is to get you out of your comfort zone, so no cop-outs.”

“Oh, so Steph doesn’t get to meet heroes like Wonder Woman because of me? That’s misogynistic.”

“Nice try, but I’m not excluding her,” Dick said. “Babs was already planning to introduce Steph to the Birds of Prey for their weekly girl’s night, so I’m taking her to Titan’s tower next month instead. You’re welcome to join us if you behave today.”

“Boo, unfair!” Tim said. It had taken him forever to get Steph back in his good graces. The least Dick could do was let Tim actually hang out with her.

“Hey, I engineered a Bring Your Kid to Work Day with the most powerful people on and off of earth just for you,” Dick said, “some appreciation would be nice.”

“Thanks, but I hate it,” Tim said, forgetting his earlier conversation with Bruce.

“You haven’t even met any of them yet.”

“If they’re like you, I don’t need to.”

“...Since when did you get so sassy?”

“It’s Alfred’s fault. He’s a bad influence.” Bruce said as he appeared in one of his more terrifying bat suits. It was inspired by Slenderman and was so creepy that once it gave a mobster a minor panic attack. B loved spooking his coworkers with it. “Are you ready?”

Tim straightened his mask and gave a thumbs up. Nightwing nodded as Alfred programmed their personal zeta tube with the right coordinates.

“Excellent,” Bruce said, “then before we go, there’s just one thing left to discuss.”

He knelt down and put both hands on Tim’s shoulders. Dick stood behind him, looking weirdly seriously.

“Tim,” Batman said, “I need you to promise to behave.”

“What?” Tim said. He must have misheard.

“I mean it,” Batman continued. “Follow all the rules. Don’t traumatize anybody. Don’t *eat* anything you’re not supposed to. Understand?”

“I think this is very uncalled for,” Tim said. “I’m always well-behaved.”

Ah, there were those pinched looks again. Tim missed seeing them on their faces. You’d think he’d just said something ridiculous. Honestly.

“Just promise me, okay?” Bruce said.

Tim sighed. He should’ve collected a lower-maintenance hoard, like stamps or something. “Okay, fine, but can I at least traumatize them a little? You always do.”

He gestured at the bat-suit's uncanny valley effect and its generally horrifying aura. It wasn't fair that Bruce got to prance around the Watchtower in his favorite outfit and Tim couldn't even nibble on someone. Where was the equality?

Tim said as much to Bruce, because sometimes his hoard member (favorite though he may be) needed things spelled out for him.

B's lips twitched into a smile. "Okay, just a little."

Dick gasped. "B!"

"As a treat," Batman said, getting to his feet.

They all headed for the zeta tube. Tim practically skipped.

"That is *not* what we discussed," Dick said, marching after Bruce. "You're spoiling him."

"Plans must be adaptable. Besides, Tim agreed to the important parts."

"The trauma of our teams isn't trivial, Bruce —" Dick hissed.

Tim, meanwhile, tried to recall exactly what the other points had been. He'd kind of started tuning Bruce out partway through.

Oh well, he'd just be himself. That was always encouraged, right?

***

Mount Justice was packed like sardines (delicious, salty sardines. Wow, Tim was hungry).

Supers were everywhere chatting and introducing awkward teens to each other. It smelled like body odor, febreeze, and various kinds of armor polish. Tim stifled a sneeze.

“Bats, Nightwing, good to see you!” Flash said, appearing in front of them, “I hadn’t expected — oh my.”

He looked at Tim with wide eyes.

“I’d forgotten you got a new one. Congratulations,” he said, then turned to Tim, “Robin, right? I’m the Flash, but you can call me Barry.”

“Code names,” Batman growled.

“Sorry, I figured if you trusted him enough to wear the suit I could trust him with my ID,” Barry laughed, “My grandson is somewhere around here. He just came in from the future and is about your age. Give me a moment I need to find him. You’ll *love* him.”

He vanished into an electric fizz. Tim tried to swat it out of the air. (He and Janet always lunged for laser lights, it was instinctual.)

Batman kept his arm on Tim’s shoulder for several minutes as he introduced him to various Justice League members. Some stared at Tim like he was a ghost, but the founding members got all misty-eyed when he smiled at them (no teeth).

“I’m glad you’ve opened your heart again, Batman,” Wonder Woman said, giving Bruce a firm arm pat. “I feared you would continue to close yourself off from the good things in the world.”

Bruce squeezed Tim’s shoulders. “Sometimes all we need is a reminder to look for the light.”

Wonder Woman beamed and decided to stop resisting her teddy bear nature, giving both Bruce and Tim a bone-breaking hug. *Ow.*

Tim also met Aquaman, Martian Manhunter, Hawkwoman, and Green Lantern. Hal Jordan rolled his eyes at Bruce as soon as introductions were done.

“Come on Spooky, let the kid live a little. You’ve been smothering him all night. How’s he supposed to meet anyone with his dad looming over him?” He said, knocking back some soda. “You’re way too overprotective.”

Tim snorted. Bruce totally was, but he was mostly worried about Tim doing something weird in front of the JLA. Pfft, as if Tim ever did anything abnormal in his life.

“Batman isn’t my dad,” he said, deciding to correct the easier thing first.

Green Lantern swished his drink. “He’s not? That’s weird, all the other Robins…”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Geez, it’s not a requirement. B just has custody so my mom won’t keep putting me in the hospital. It’s totally different.”

Tim was pretty sure Dick and Jason never had to deal with Bruce emailing adoption papers alongside business documents to *their* dads to try and trick him into signing over full custody. Jack triple-read everything now. This really wasn’t helping his paranoia.

Green Lantern choked on his soda. Several other supers looked over. The ones with super senses looked alarmed for some reason.

“What?” Hal Jorden coughed. “Hospital?”

“Oh boy. I think it’s time I introduce Robin to the Titans,” Nightwing said brightly, swanning over and plucking Tim out of B’s arms. “Toodles, y'all. Nothing to see here. Byeee.”

Tim gave a casual wave to Green Lantern as Dick steered them toward the buffet table where the Titans were gathered.

“What was that about?” Tim asked. “We were in the middle of a conversation.”

Dick fake chuckled. “You know what, I’m not even going to try and explain it. You don’t even know what you’re doing, do you?”

“Uh, no duh,” Tim said, “You won’t *tell* me.”

They reached the Titans. Tim’s stomach growled as he eyed their plates. When was the last time he ate? Two hours ago? Last week? He needed to keep better track. His appetite was increasing at an alarming rate. His birthday cow was already gone.

“Everyone, this is Robin III,” Dick said proudly, standing behind Tim as he showed him off to his friends. “Isn’t he cute?”

Tim recognized all of Dick’s squad; Starfire was a glowstick with fluffy red hair that looked *so soft* , Raven was dressed in a comfy head-to-toe robe, Cyborg was eating a hotdog, and Beast Boy was —

Tim’s brain short-circuited. Gar looked good. And not good in a “wow you’re a hot young adult who obviously works out” way. Nope, Beast Boy smelled like over fifty different animals and his skin was constantly doing small genetic tweaks under the surface and autocorrecting his DNA.

Tim’s stomach growled. He looked *delicious.*

When their eyes met, Gar took a big jump back, hair standing on end. Tim smiled, showing a few more teeth than a normal human would have.

“What the hell —” Gar squeaked.

“Language,” Dick said obliviously, “there are little ears around. Including my new baby brother’s. Right, Robin?”

Dick ruffled Tim's hair. He glared up at him. "Hey, I'm fifteen! We've been through this."

On the honor of his mother and her amazing parenting, he was required to throw hands at anyone who dissed his level of independence.

"Aw, but you'l always be a little brother to me," Dick chuckled and stuck his tongue out.

Ugh, Tim wasn't dealing with this right now. He'd give Dick a math lesson when they got back to the nest and remind him that babies weren't double digits. He'd let the brother comment slide though, even though Dick was *hoard* and that was obviously better.

"Whatever. It's nice to eat you —I mean meet you," Tim said, turning back to the Titans. "Nightwing didn't tell me he had such delicious friends."

Dick's arm tightened minutely around his shoulders. The group (sans Gar) laughed and said something about puns being hereditary.

Starfire floated over and laughed. "He *is* cute. Just look at him!"

She pinched his cheeks and cooed. Tim had never been more glad that she and Dick broke up. She was way too touchy-feely.

"You have an interesting aura." Raven said quietly, frowning at Tim, "it is unlike anything I've seen."

"No kidding," Beast Boy said, trying to rub away the goosebumps on his arms. Tim smiled at him again.

"Thank you," he told Raven, "people have told me I have a unique way of lighting up a room."

"That was arson and those people were witnesses," Dick said dryly. "Anyway guys, how's the food?"

“Great. Thanks for putting this together,” Cyborg said. His plate was nearly empty. “It’s been a while since we’ve interacted with the league like this.”

“Yeah, it was about time,” Dick grinned, leaning his elbow on Tim’s head. “I’m hoping Robby here can meet some folks, maybe even make a team of his own? He needs to socialize more.”

“In that case, I’ve got a good friend for him right here!”

Tim jumped as Flash reappeared, holding someone by the scruff of the neck.

“Grandpa, let me go!” they yelled, flailing like a ragdoll. Barry chuckled and set the kid down by Tim.

“This is my grandson, Impulse,” he said, “sorry it took so long to find him. He was in New Zealand again.”

“I wanted to eat a kiwi!” Impulse said. He was the same height as Tim and had insanely big hair. It had its own orbit and floated with excess static.

Barry laughed and patted Impulse’s head. “And how was that going for you?”

“Bad,” Impulse grumbled, “Nobody told me they were fruit, people, *and* birds. I don't know which to try!”

“You should eat one of each,” Tim said.

Impulse’s eyes widened. “Yeah…That’s a good idea!”

“Uhm, maybe not the people,” Flash said, laughing awkwardly. “That’s generally a no-go.”

“Oh, is it? Morals kind of aren’t a thing in the future.” Impulse said. “I’ve never had human meat, but there were a lot of people who said it was alright.”

“If it moves, you can eat it,” Tim agreed.

Gar stepped behind Raven, looking nervous.

“Yeah, exactly!” Impulse said. “There’s too much good food out there to be picky.”

Finally, someone after Tim’s own heart. Maybe tonight wasn’t a total wash.

“Want to go raid the buffet table?" He asked.

“Do I ever!” Impulse said. He grabbed Tim’s hand and yanked him to the food at supersonic speed.

Dick and Flash exchanged concerned looks, but Tim didn’t pay them any mind, too focused on his new best friend.

This kid was *so* going in the hoard.

***

He made it another hour before he messed up. During that time he ran around the room with Impulse, comparing weird food combinations and making fun of everyone's outfits. They got Superboy and Wondergirl in on the game, though they were way too picky. Seriously, they needed to live a little.

"I thought you Bats were supposed to be the serious ones," Superboy said. He seemed to be required to roll his eyes after every sentence.

"Nah, that's B," Tim said. "Robins are like the light to his darkness."

Which seemed a little farfetched, but actually made a lot of sense when you thought really hard about it. After all, they all consistently brought out Bruce's fun side, although they did it in different ways. Dick had been sunshine, Jason had been a beacon of hope, and Tim was a trash fire started by a pyromaniac that was burning behind a bar. They were the main saviors of Bruce's shaky mental health and it was a title each Robin held with pride.

"I think you're super bright. Like the brightest person ever," Impulse said, returning from the buffet with more food for both of them. "We should all totally team up!"

"I mean, it *would* increase our firepower," Wondergirl said, eyeing their plates warily. Tim didn't get what her deal was. Nothing was moving on them.

"I bet together we could take on some real weirdos," Kon agreed, starting to smile.

For that blissful moment, Tim was on cloud nine. More people meant funner fights, potentially even against foes Batman would let him eat. A team-up would be awesome for the Tim Drake Robin brand, and Jack and Janet would both be so proud of him for networking with people. . . Okay, only Jack would be, but Janet would *totally* be on board with the eating thing.

However, it all came crashing down seconds later.

See, Tim had made a miscalculation.

Well, to be more accurate, Bruce and Dick made a miscalculation. They should have known not to trust his self-control when animal shapeshifters were in the room. Tim wasn't responsible for his actions when hangry.

"Teaming up sounds —" he started to say, when somebody rammed into him.

Somebody who turned out to be Beast Boy, but Tim didn't exactly key into that. Getting a sharp elbow to the small of his back (AKA his *blindspot)* turned off his brain for a second. The only thought going through his head was "threat" followed directly by "food."

So yeah, Tim's fight response activated and he'd bit first and asked questions later, but it wasn't a big deal, even though the way Gar had screamed made it seem like Tim was actively trying to kill him.

"Tim!" Dick yanked him off Gar, looking seconds away from homicide. "What on earth — We talked about this!"

"Uh, oops?" Tim said. He casually wiped the blood off his jaw. Hopefully, nobody noticed him lick it off his hand. "My bad."

Dick's face twitched. "Bad? *Bad?* Look at Gar!"

He was holding Tim up by his cape, toes barely touching the floor, so Tim had to crane his neck to look at Beast Boy hyperventilating on the ground, muttering about demon children as he stared at the small bite on his arm.

"Oh come on, it was just a nibble, he won't even need the hospital," Tim said. "I had worse injuries when I was nine. He'll be *fine."*

Nobody looked very reassured by those words. The entire JLA was staring at him in horror, and the teens he had been talking to were shell-shocked. Well, all of them except Impulse, he looked fine. Tim was pretty sure nothing ever phased him. What a champ.

Finally, Batman stepped forward and sighed. "The seriousness is irrelevant. Robin, what did I tell you earlier?"

"Um —"

"You promised to follow all three rules."

Oh no, that was the Disappointed™ face. Since when had Bruce mastered it? Had Jack been teaching him on the sly? This was unfair. Tim didn't have a defense against it.

"Wait, three?" Hal muttered as Tim tried to find an excuse lying around. "I thought you only had one."

"I had to make a few more," Batman snapped. "Robin…"

Drat, there was no way out of this, was there?

Tim sighed. "I know, I know. No killing, no maiming, no cannibalism. But in my defense, this doesn't really count as —hey!"

Bruce grabbed him by the ear and yanked him toward the nearest zeta tube. Nightwing stayed by his friends, face in his hands and groaning with familiar resignation.

"I can't believe this. The *one time* we go out," Batman said. "I expected you to be on your best behavior. Not *eat* people *again.* We're going back to Gotham until you can be civilized."

"I barely broke skin, stop being so judgy." Tim said as Bruce typed in their home's zeta code. "Killer Croc can do it so why can't I? Besides, it was an accident!"

Although Gar tasted great.

Bruce dragged Tim to the teleporter, hissing and hrning under his breath about difficult teenagers. Tim was insulted; he'd been great today. Gar even had all of his fingers! Bruce was such a perfectionist.

As the zeta tube powered up, a blur of red zipped through the room.

“Bye, Robin!” Impulse said, waving excitedly from next to the Flash, who was grinning and filming everything on his phone.

“By Imp, it was good to meet you. Let’s hang out later!” Tim yelled. “You too Kon, Cassie!”

Bart waved faster. Tim couldn’t wait for their team-up.

Kon and Cassie gave him shaky thumbs-ups. The fluorescents weren’t good for their complexions, they looked borderline queasy, and their shell-shocked expressions weren’t doing them any favors either. Oh well. There was gingerale somewhere, they’d be fine.

The last thing Tim heard before being beamed back to earth was Gar yelling at Dick, voice cracking. "What is wrong with that kid!?"

Then Tim was gone in a burst of white light and his evil social visit was finally over.

***

When Tim and Bruce reappeared in the Batcave, Alfred was reading a Sherlock Holmes novel in the corner, sipping tea and existing in a state of detached bliss.

“Back so soon?” he asked, calmly turning a page.

“Yes, because Tim decided that rule three was optional,” Bruce growled, taking off the cowl.

Tim threw his hands in the air. “Oh my gosh, there’s just no pleasing you! First you ask me to be myself, then when I do you get mad. You gotta make up your mind, B, I’m not a telepath.”

“Thank heavens for that,” Alfred said, nibbling on a crumpet. “Imagine the chaos.”

“I’d be an *amazing* mindreader, but that’s besides the point. I did everything you wanted,” Tim continued, counting off on his fingers. “I said hi to people, made friends, behaved, blah blah blah. I deserved a little snack. I did a good job!”

Besides, it hadn’t even been on purpose. What was Tim supposed to do, *not* instinctively defend himself?

“I said you could mildly traumatize a few supers, not send half of them to therapy,” Bruce said. His phone was vibrating in his pocket as it blew up with messages. “I wanted you to make a good impression, but now I’ll have to spend weeks convincing the JLA you’re not a feral dragon.”

“Oh, they’re aware he’s a dragon, then?” Alfred said.

Bruce froze. Tim blinked in surprise.

“They don’t?” Tim asked.

Bruce rubbed his temples. “I… may have neglected to mention it, out of respect for Jack’s concerns about trafficking.”

“You forgot,” Tim grinned, “you totally forgot. Ha! See? I’m not the only one.”

“I didn’t —”

“You totally did,” Tim snickered, “right Alfred? Bruce totally blanked.”

“Indeed. It seems to be a family trait,” Alfred replied, winking slyly at Tim.

Bruce groaned. “I have to make some calls.”

He pulled out his phone and retreated to the darkest corner of the cave to answer his text messages. Tim pointed and laughed at him as he went.

He took it all back. This was the best day ever. Maybe Dick could make this an annual event?

Chapter End Notes

Gar; I thought the Watchtower was a safe place. What IS that kid?
Hal: Yeah, where the heck did Bats even find the little monster?
Dick: He's NOT a monster. Don't you dare call him that!
Hal: Well, he sure ain't normal.
Dick: Robin's home life was . . . unique. We're raising him to be better.
Hal: Obviously, it's going so well.
Dick:
Dick: I know where you live.
...

Meanwhile, in Nanda Parbat

Assassin: Jason is gone!
Talia: What?!

...

Meanwhile NOT in Nanda Parbat

Jason: DRIVE DRIVE DRIVE!
Beta assassin: I'm going as fast as I can! Ugh, this is insane. You can't leave, you're not even done with your training!
Jason: I'm not staying here three more years to learn to weave my own Kevlar when vengeance is RIGHT there, Carl.
Beta: Talia is going to murder you.
Jason: Oh please, been there done that. I don't fear death. Now eyes on the road or you can forget ever finding out the ending to my Coffee shop AU.
Beta: This is blackmail.
Jason: Yeah, and it's working.
Beta: You're a sick, sick man

The Great Escape

Chapter Summary

You ground Tim? You take away his Robin suit? Oh! Oh! Jail for hoard! Jail for One Thousand years!

Chapter Notes

My original draft of this chapter was 1 page of nothing.
Me: Oh, I'll just edit it a little.
4k later
Me: Oops

RavenGranger and I had too much fun making titles for this chapter. Some honorable mentions include:
-Do Not Pass Go
-My Emotional Support Speedster
-Jail for 1000 Years

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim was grounded; not benched, not on medical leave, not even condemned to hiking in the woods with his homicidal mother.

Grounded.

Jack had *not* been happy about the Gar incident. Tim had almost distracted him with the reminder of his new best friend, but Dick and Bruce had also been on that call, so it had been half an hour of rehashing Tim's list of supposed sins over the last four months and berating him for being a "hellacious rapscallion."

(Bruce had the weirdest insults, probably because he was raised by a smarmy ex-military Butler.)

Anyway, until Tim could be "properly civilized" he wasn't allowed on patrol, cases, or near the Watchtower. It was annoying, stupid, and a complete overreaction.

"Tim, since April you've put a man in ICU, bitten my teammate, and eaten at least three stray dogs," Dick said when Tim complained. "Even Jack admits you're more violent these days. It has to stop."

"It's puberty!"

"Uh-huh. I can't believe I'm saying this, but if Janet can rein herself in, so can you."

That was unfair. Janet had decades more experience than Tim at least. Probably closer to a hundred (although nobody was actually sure how old she was). Yes, females were more violent and her self-control was legendary, but come on. Tim was still a juvenile. He was supposed to act out!

Dick was unmoved. Those stupid parenting books were indoctrinating him with boundary setting. There was no mercy left in him.

"You used to be the Sam to my Frodo," Tim said scathingly, "but now you're just *Boromir."*

A traitor, driven mad with power. He had to go down.

Unfortunately, Dick had hidden the spray bottle of doom, so Tim's revenge had to wait. But he had plans. Oh, he had *marvelous* plans.

Barbara rolled her eyes as he cackled in the corner of the Clocktower that night, hunched over his computer as a prank compilation played while he coded. Vengeance would be his.

"If I didn't know it, I'd say you were planning something," she said.

"I am, but don't worry, you're not in the crossfire."

“Hn, well as long as you get it on video for me then.”

Tim bookmarked the compilation and put it in his “For Dick's Downfall” playlist, then swiveled his chair around. “No probs. Hey, Babs, you’re smart, right?”

She gave him a side-eye. “Phrasing it as a question won’t win you any points with me, Boy Wonder.”

“Right, sorry. Anyway, I made a new friend. Can you get me his phone number so I can send him memes?”

After Steph, Tim had been reluctant to make new friends, but Impulse was just as grossed out by romance as he was so there was no danger there. Plus the laser lights he made from running fast were super fun to chase. Their friendship could not die here. Tim wouldn’t allow it.

“Sure,” Babs said. She tapped a few keys, then paused. “Do they actually know you’re friends, or is this another case of you stalking someone and adopting them without consent?”

“Stop comparing me to Bruce. We were introduced. We had a conversation and everything.”

And he hadn’t stalked Steph, just the Waynes. Get it right Babs.

“Oh, you’re talking about Impulse,” she hummed. “Sure, kid. I’m glad you’re socializing. Just promise not to eat him.”

“Me? I would never,” Tim said, affronted.

Tim didn’t eat hoard, that was just *wrong.* Impulse wasn’t officially part of it *yet,* but the point still stood.

Barbara equipped a patented Alfred Eyebrow™ and turned back to her monitor. The clickety-clack of her keys was extra judgemental.

"Just get back to your coding homework, lizard brain," she said. "Bruce is only letting me babysit you if you stay off the comms, so don't waste any more time."

Tim rolled his eyes but did as she said. This firewall was hard to beat, but he was happy to get the practice in. All he had to do to motivate himself was pretend the code had miniature Joker faces. It made watching his virus obliterate them very satisfying.

Moments later, a new phone number was dropped into Tim's phone. Hmm, maybe Babs wasn't as much of a taskmaster as she pretended to be.

He pulled up the number and spammed Impulse with fourteen Sonic memes. He didn't have many friends so he wasn't sure what text etiquette was, but that was a normal amount, right?

Seconds later, Impulse replied with forty-seven different emojis and ten youtube videos.

Yeah, Tim was nailing this.

***

Tim had three punishments for biting Gar. Well, four technically, but Dick said an apology letter didn't count because it was just common courtesy. (Tim was adding that to his list of the most ridiculous things he'd had the misfortune of hearing. Apologizing was bad enough, but in *writing?* There was no sense in that at all. *)*

The first punishment was being grounded. Enough said.

The second was attending some galas later in the season, but Tim wasn't worried. Janet had fun at human parties. He'd be OK.

The third punishment was terrible though. Not because it was evil, but because it was *boring.* Bruce had taken unholy delight in choosing it.

He got Tim an internship at WE.

The logic was thus: Tim would be around people and learn their mysterious ways. He'd also be within arm's reach of Bruce at all times, therefore eliminating more biting incidents. Plus, it would keep him busy during summer vacation. Triple win!

Aside from the fact that for Tim this was a lose-lose-lose. No introverting, no biting, no free time? This *had* to violate at least one human right.

"You have the right idea, Cass," Tim moaned, sprawled out on the attic floor. "I should never have become Robin. If I'd stuck with stalking, none of this would be happening!"

Humoring the Waynes should only go so far.

Cass patted his head, fingers coated in pixie stix powder. "There there, little brother. Pain is lesson."

"Did your dad say that?"

"Yes. He bad. But this funny pain. Ha."

Tim rolled over and moaned again. Cruel, cruel world turning even her against him. As soon as Cass was done cuddling, he was going to the shed to borrow a shovel. It was about time he dug himself a literal pit of despair to sink into. Metaphors weren't cutting it anymore.

***

“Can we go now?”

“No.”

“Can we go *now?* ”

“No.”

“Can we —”

An executive slapped their docket onto the table. “Mr. Wayne, perhaps Mr. Drake could use a break?”

Tim smiled at the rando, his new knight in shining armor, his light in the darkness, the ying to his yang —

“Oh, but he’s learning so much,” Bruce said. “I wouldn’t want him to miss out.”

The entire board twitched simultaneously. Tim was impressed. That took a lot of practice. Of course, Tim had been giving that to them in spades, so maybe he shouldn’t be so surprised.

This was the fifth day in a row Bruce had gone into the office with Tim dragged behind him like a mangy, rabid alley cat. Each day he confiscated Tim’s phone, told him to learn names and faces, and forced him to eat boring cafeteria food instead of raw meat. By the time they got to their meetings, Tim was antsy enough to consider throwing himself out the window as a viable option to escape them.

Unfortunately, Bruce was good at keeping a firm hand on his shoulder the entire time. Tim just had to endure.

“I understand you want your . . .” Rando executive trailed off. Nobody actually was sure how to classify Tim in relation to the Waynes.

"My ward," Bruce smiled. “I have temporary guardianship.”

“ . . . Right, your ward, to have a learning experience, but we have a lot to cover. Please, let’s stay on track.”

“Oh *alright.”* Bruce sighed airily. Tim poked his side, vaguely disappointed that his pretend ego didn’t deflate. “I suppose if this is *that* serious.”

It was remarkable how much patience the board had for Bruce. They were all WE veterans and have been putting up with his airhead act for over a decade. It was also remarkable how far the sound of grinding teeth could carry.

“Wonderful,” Rando said. “We should be done in less than two hours then. Now, on page 6—”

Two hours? Tim would be dead of old age by then. He dropped his head against the table and groaned. Why were they doing this? What was the point? They were rich people; they weren’t paid by the hour. They shouldn’t be wasting precious time going over things with glaringly obvious solutions. Tim had a life he needed to live before the sweet embrace of death dragged him from this reality, and *life wasn’t found in board meetings that should have been emails!*

“That’s . . . very dramatic,” an intern said.

Tim looked up. The entire table was staring at him. Oops. He’d said that aloud.

“Obvious solutions?” one of the executives sniffed. He was wearing a giant Rolex. “I should like to see you do better, young man.”

“Easy. I can get us out of here in twenty minutes,” Tim said, sitting back up.

Bruce’s lazy smile became a bit forced, the intern looked ready to start filming a vine, and the board was dubious, but it was true. Five minutes to say the words, fifteen to knock them into

everyone's skulls. Bada boom bada bing.

"Well, why not?" Rolex dude said. "If you're *so* smart, show us what you've learned. After all, Mr. Wayne, learning needs practical applications, does it not?"

Bruce laughed awkwardly, but Tim nodded. This guy knew his stuff. Good. He'd hate for all of Bruce's board to be useless.

He stood and grabbed a whiteboard marker.

"So first off, that deal with Keschner won't work because of their international policy, which just got updated last month. The contract needs to be updated with Section B13 in mind, otherwise we'll be wasting legal resources fixing it," Tim said. "That's not good, since the merger with General Power is going to need those departments in the future, and that takes priority. However, if we renegotiate this way —"

Tim scribbled out their plan of attack, letting his mouth run a mile a minute. Most of the board members had eyebrows up to their hairlines and Bruce was staring at Tim with undisguised bafflement, but whatever. Tim was owning this. He'd be home sweet home in no time.

***

Bruce cornered him in the car. "What was that?"

Tim put his feet on the dash and sent Impulse another TikTok video. "Huh?"

"That was a very well-thought-out presentation. When did you learn so much about business?"

Tim shook his bangs out of his eyes and focused on his phone screen. Oh, Steph would like this meme. "It's Mom's hobby. She said business is like legal murder. When you buy out a company it's like devouring them alive."

Her mate ran a company, of course she knew how to look after it just in case. What mattered to Jack mattered to her. That was how hoards worked.

Naturally, that went for Tim as well, but he'd hoped he wouldn't be dragged to the boring megacorporation for another few years. Good thing he'd absorbed all of Janet's lessons and skimmed WE's policies all week. Bruce would have been trapped in there for hours if he hadn't.

***

It had been two weeks. Two, tortuous weeks without punching people in the streets. Tim hadn't bitten anyone in all that time, as per the agreement, and was demanding he get his suit back from the fireproof safe Alfred locked it in.

Bruce hmmed. Dick crossed his arms. Alfred dusted a banister as he listened in.

"Alright," Bruce said at length. "But you stay close to me on patrol, and you'll keep your internship. Remember, you're still technically grounded, even if I let you on some cases."

Well, that was a bummer, but he'd take it. Two-Face had just broken out and it was high time Tim paid him a visit.

***

Didn't mean he had to like being half-grounded though. It was impossible to stretch his proverbial wings, and he was getting grouchy. Luckily, he had someone he could vent to.

"My mom said to humor them, but B is *such* a control freak," he told Impulse over the phone. "I don't understand humans."

"Me neither!" Bart said. "They're *weird.* Batman reminds me of Max a lot. I bet they'd get along."

Max Mercury had custody of Impulse. Tim kept forgetting to ask why, because Barry really liked Bart. Maybe it was because of all the fights he kept getting into with Kid Flash? Having both of them in Key City hadn't been going well. It was a whole thing. They regarded each other the same way Dick forced himself to eat Fiber One; detestation, disgust, and baleful dislike, but ultimately it was still cereal so it was his duty to keep buying it. Likewise, Bart and Wally couldn't stand each other, but they were family.

"Max and B aren't allowed to meet," Tim decided. "They'd probably bond by making more rules."

Bart nodded seriously.

Tim dropped his phone onto his face and sighed. Cass was sleeping until patrol, Steph was trying to rig her library's summer reading program, Barbara was doing online college classes, Dick was off who knew where, and Bruce was working (the horror). Unless Tim willingly helped Alfred repair furniture (and get chewed out for breaking it in the first place), he was trapped in this empty manor with nothing to do. Life was misery. Life was pain. It needed a punch to the face.

"Dude, do I need to rescue you?" Bart asked.

"No metas in Gotham," Tim said.

"You're a dragon."

"Yeah, *not* a meta."

Bart pouted, then grinned. "It's okay, I'm super fast! Batman won't even know I'm there."

That . . . was a great point.

Tim considered it, feeling excitement rise. In-person fun times with Bart? Possibly eating a Kiwi or three? Escaping Bruce's helicopter madness? It was too good to be true, and yet . . .

Tim picked his phone off his face. “I’m listening.”

***

Time: 10:21 AM.

Location: Wayne Manor, dining room. Breakfast.

Mission: Escape.

Obstacle: The Waynes, and also food.

“Slow down chum,” Bruce said. “You’re going to choke.”

Tim nodded and came up for air. This was his first meal in six days, sue him for being enthusiastic. He needed all the calories he could get. Who knew when his stomach would behave again? (The crocodile metabolism was looking pretty likely.)

Alfred refilled his plate with more eggs and bacon. Tim dumped sugar on them with gusto. These would go great with orange juice.

“Hey, that actually looks normal. I’m proud of you,” Dick said.

“Normal is a state of mind,” Tim said. “Bart understands.”

“ . . . Maybe don’t use Impulse as a reference for anything.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re friends with Kid Flash. He’s filling your head with lies.”

Bart was the superior speedster. He had the red lightning, the hair, and the insatiable urge to eat any and everything. Wally couldn’t hold a candle to him.

Saying this resulted in a minor argument with Dick, but Tim would die on this hill.

“Wally doesn’t even have good taste! Not like Impulse.” Tim continued five minutes into the debate. “He even agrees that Twinkies stuffed with pickles are good. Bart'll eat almost anything."

"Only edible things, I hope," Alfred said, averting his eyes as Tim mixed seaweed flakes into his jello.

" *Anything,"* Tim repeated, because he couldn't stress enough how awesome and rare a quality that was in a human. Impulse had even swallowed a stink bug on a dare!

Dick looked at him, visibly warring with something inside himself before shrugging. “Oh well, to each their own. At least you have another friend. I guess the family fun day wasn't a total bust. Gar doesn't even have a scar."

“Of course not. I told you I didn’t bite hard,” Tim said. He hadn’t even struck bone. Gar was just dramatic.

“Nope, you did great. Right, Bruce?” Dick chirped.

Bruce grunted, focused on his morning paper. Tim was convinced there was a secret Illuminati code; no way those things were that riveting without one.

He checked his watch. It was almost 10:30. Any minute now . . .

" —What do you say, Tim, aren't I great at parenting?" Dick said.

Tim hid his watch behind his back. “Um —”

He must have missed a transition sentence. Why were they talking about this? Best just to humor him.

"You're doing great," Tim hoped he sounded sincere. "If you didn’t poke me into socializing I wouldn't have two friends. Good job."

He was too far away to give him a head pat, so Tim threw a raisin at him instead. It hit Dick in the face.

"Ow! Oh, thanks Tim…so, am I better at this than Janet?"

"Nah, Mom is perfection itself, but you’ll get to her level someday.”

Dick made an affronted squawk, but Tim's phone dinged with twenty new texts from Bart. Tim skimmed them and grinned. Perfect timing.

"Ha, make that four friends!" He scrambled to his feet.

"What are you talking about?" Dick asked.

A blur of red appeared at the treeline, then Impulse smacked against the French doors like a bug on a windshield. Bruce finally looked up from his newspaper, staring wide-eyed at Bart as he rubbed a goose egg rapidly forming on his head.

Well, oops. Subtly was out the window, but improvisation was key to a good strategy.

Bruce was the biggest obstacle. He had to be dealt with immediately. Luckily, Tim had a plan.

“Think fast!” he said, and threw a bagel at him.

It hit Bruce on the nose and Tim jumped over the table and bolted for the patio, the siren song of freedom drowning everything else out.

“Sayonara suckers. Liberation awaits!” he cried.

Dick stood and tried to grab his collar. “Wait, Timmy, what does that mean? Come back!”

Tim weaseled out of his jacket, crashed the doors open, and lunged toward Impulse. Dick should have known not to underestimate Tim’s contortionist skills.

"Tim, you're still grounded. Don't you dare —" Bruce said, rising to his feet.

But he was too late. Bart grabbed Tim's wrist and yanked him sonic-speed three hundred miles south, cutting off B's lecture and leaving Wayne Manor far behind.

Tim felt like he was going to throw up from the G-force, but was once again impressed by just how fast speedsters could go. Janet and Tim looked sluggish in comparison, and they were the fastest type of dragons there were.

The two of them vanished into the proverbial sunset (and literal Gotham smog) to a life of fun, reckless choices, and zero supervision.

Dick was right. Having friends *rocked.*

***

Tim and Bart had a plan. A simple plan, but a good one. It boiled down to “have fun.”

It was a raging success. They'd speedrun the Adirondack trail, combined Jalapenos with Smarties, and ping-ponged from coast to coast to stop petty crime and harass Wally West, who'd accidentally broken Bart's Gameboy the other day. He was now on a scavenger hunt to find all his socks and underwear strategically hidden around the country. (Family rivalries were so fun. Where could Tim get some of that?)

Now, Tim and Bart sat on their field of victory, surrounded by candy wrappers as a van burned behind them. It had been stolen, the thieves were safely tied to a nearby tree, and the heroes had helped themselves to the sweets inside. Someone would eventually see the smoke and call the cops, but for now, all was well.

"This is peaceful," Tim said. "Too peaceful."

Bart nodded. "Wanna visit another arcade?"

"Nah." Tim kicked back on the grass. He had another three to five hours before Bruce tracked him down, and Nightwing had almost caught them in Manchester because stupid Wally had tipped him off. Their last activity needed to end with a bang.

Bart flopped onto the ground next to him and pulled out his phone. Tim didn't bother to peek over his shoulder. Bart scrolled so fast it gave Tim vertigo. They should have invited Cass or Steph too, but Bart couldn't have carried them all. Tim could probably manage two people in dragon form, but not for cross-country shenanigans. Maybe after his molt? He'd be a lot bigger then.

"How about a museum?" Impulse asked.

"Boring."

"Escape room?"

"You mean *home?"*

"True facts. How about —oh!"

Tim rolled over. “Oh?”

Bart shoved his phone into Tim’s face. “Look, there’s a party!”

It was a group chat titled *Young Just Us.* The latest thread was a meeting time and location. Some of the names were very familiar.

“Why aren’t I in this chat?” Tim asked, scrolling through the messages. It had been formed over a week ago by Wondergirl. “And who’s Secret?”

“A ghost!”

“Ghosts can use phones?”

Bart paused. Oof, looked like Impulse.exe had crashed.

Tim stretched, letting his vertebrae lengthen a few extra inches to get a better pop. He was trying to shift more often. Bruce said he needed to embrace both side effects, plus it was probably healthy. And hey, it negated needing a chiropractor so who was Tim to complain?

“We need to test her ghost powers,” Bart whispered. “For science.”

Tim blinked and suddenly Bart’s nose was right in his face. His eyes had the same maniacal gleam that Jack’s did when he had a harebrained scheme. Except, unlike Jack, Tim was fully supportive of whatever was going through Impulses’ brain.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Bart asked.

Probably not, but then again . . .

“Party crash?” Tim hazarded.

“Party crash.”

Wow, they really *did* share the same brain cell.

Bart yanked TIm to his feet, then they were blasting off again.

***

When Tim and Bart entered Mount Justice there was a small crowd already gathered around a table. Tim recognized Superboy and Wondergirl, and he figured the smoky girl was Secret, but the arrow girl and assassin lady were new.

"Oh no, not him," Kon said, scrambling to his feet to point at Tim. "We want mentally stable people here, not nutjobs."

"Robin is smart and funny!" Bart defended. "He'll fit right in."

"He tried to eat Beast Boy!" Cassie said.

The others stared at him in alarm. Luckily, Tim was secure enough about himself not to be offended by the looks.

"It was an accident," He said. "I couldn’t help it.”

More dubious expressions. Kon outright scoffed. “Couldn’t help it, right. What are you, a vampire?”

“I mean —wait, what?”

Now it was Tim’s turn to stare. Who’d ever heard of a vampire dragon? Did Kon hit his head?

The others seemed to misinterpret his silence. They all started shifting and avoiding eye contact.

The arrow girl coughed awkwardly. “Geez Superboy, I know the Bats have an aesthetic, but that was kind of insensitive. Even if he was a vampire, it doesn’t make him evil.”

“What’s next, calling ghosts bad?” the ghost girl said, arms crossed.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Kon groaned. “And he’s not a vampire anyway, right?”

“No —” Tim said, still trying to wrap his head around *vampire dragon.*

“See? No harm no foul. He’s a regular human, just like us.”

Wait, *what?*

“Still, Secret’s right. You should be less speciest,” the assassin girl said. “There’s got to be a group of good vampires out there somewhere.”

“I wasn’t —” Kon sputtered.

“Oh, like in Twilight,” Secret gasped. “I read that one!”

The room erupted into a debate about books, mythology, and racism. People were pointing, Secret was making fog everywhere, and the arrow girl was waving a copy of Twilight around. It was chaos, but Tim couldn’t revel in it. His brain was a broken record of *no way.*

“You guys seriously don’t know?” He blurted, cutting through the noise.

The bickering stopped and the stares returned.

“Know what?” Cassie frowned, the picture of honest confusion.

They didn’t. Oh God, *they didn’t.*

Bruce said he’d explained things. He’d gone right to the JLA founders and awkwardly shared the PDF and some pictures of Tim’s dragon baby pictures. There’d been a *PowerPoint* , for crying out loud.

And yet, for whatever reason, these motley sidekicks and start-up heroes hadn’t gotten the memo. Their mentors and idols hadn’t clued them in, and Tim’s secret was secure against all odds.

Tim turned to Bart and put a hand on his shoulder to ground himself. The speedster stared at him with that wonderful, perfect look of glee.

Both their faces split into wide, identical grins.

“Nothing,” Tim said.

“Yeah, just that Anita is right. Kon is *so* moded,” Impulse chirped. “Antiquated worldviews are antiquated. He’d go the way of the Kiwis in the future.”

“I didn’t mean it like —”

Everyone started yelling again. They got so distracted that they forgot all about the original topic.

But Tim didn't. He was vibrating almost as much as Bart.

He'd been taught to hide what he was his entire life, but he'd never expected to be *this* good at it. . . or that the JLA would be this bad at communicating, but that was a different tangent.

Tim squeezed Bart's shoulder again and got an excited nudge in return. Somehow, the day had gotten even better. Now, time to see just how far he could take this before they clued into what he was.

This was going to be so much fun.

Chapter End Notes

You're walking through Crime Alley
There's no one around and your phone is dead
Out of the corner of your eye you spot him
Timothy Drake

He's following you, about 30 feet back
He gets down on all fours and breaks into a sprint
He's gaining on you
Timothy Drake

You're looking for your car but you're all turned around
He's almost upon you now
And you can see there's blood on his face
My God, there's blood everywhere!

Running for your life (from Timothy Drake)
He's brandishing a knife (it's Timothy Drake)
Lurking in the shadows
Gotham Vigilante Timothy Drake
Living in the streets (Timothy Drake)
Killing for sport (Timothy Drake)
Eating all the bodies
Actual cannibal Timothy Drake 🎶

Now with music! (The OG song): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0u4M6vppCI&ab_channel=robcantor

Too bad Young Justice doesn't have a therapy plan for young heroes, lol.

RavenGranger also insisted I include this snippet about Tim's Pit of Despair. She wanted to know how deep it got.

Tim: dig dig, dig a tunnel 🎶

The entire Wayne family, at the window watching him do this for hours.
Dick: I mean, he's not hurting anyone, and it's good exercise.
Alfred: those were my favorite hyacinth bushes.
Bruce: we'll make him fix them.
Alfred: I daresay you will, or I'll bury him six feet under.

Meanwhile

Talia: I expected better of you Carl. Did you really think you could outrun us?
Beta Assassin: I only needed to buy enough time to read the last chapter. You're too late, Fanny and Edmund have a beautiful queerplatonic romance and it'll live rent free in my head forever!
Assassin: Dang it, man, don't spoil the ending!
Talia: It's okay, we have the document, we'll go over it in book club later. But back to business. Where is Jason?
Beta: Who knows? You'll never find him. He's a master of disguise.

Elsewhere

Customs: Can... Tason Jodd, step forward?
Jason *wearing a fake mustache*: That's me!
Customs: Tason, you got flagged in the metal detector because you're carrying a rocket launcher.
Jason: Sir, that's my emotional support bazooka. I need it to sleep at night.
Customs: ... You know what, I'm not paid enough for this. Have a nice flight.
Jason: Oh, I intend to.

Talia *dragging Beta back to Nanda Parbat*: Bold of you to assume I wasn't waiting for this to happen. Jason needs to learn to take initiative, and what better way to do that than stealing from the league and running away? Now give me that phone. I need to read the engagement scene.

Hello, We’re Trying to Reach You About Your Extended Mortality

Chapter Summary

What’s the difference between junk mail and death threats? In Gotham, surprisingly few.

Chapter Notes

comes back from the Walmart parking lot with canola oil dripping from my head

Me *shoving this at Raven*: THIS IS FUNNY, NO? LAUGH. LAUGH!!

Raven: Wait, let me put the oil cans in the recycling first!

(She did laugh, just not where I thought she would 😅)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim was itchy. He hated starched collars. This was cruel and unusual punishment. Bruce said attending gala season was bearable, but these events were so boring that they were probably a violation of the Geneva Convention. He told the reporters so when they stuck microphones in his face at the charity gala, asking stupid questions.

Money? Why would he know where the money was going? He didn't even know he'd be *attending* this thing until half an hour ago. Besides, it didn't matter. Bruce was helping someone with it and everyone could trust him to be responsible in this singular instance.

The reporters laughed and patted him on the back. Tim wrinkled his nose. For some reason, they loved getting quotes from him.

"And that's enough meme material for today," Dick said, casually throwing an arm around Tim and escorting him up the steps.

"I'm a meme?"

"You've gone viral," Dick said, both amused and weary. "This is your second gala, and you've already corrupted the internet. I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

In Tim's defense, he normally would have, but between crime-fighting, Jack's skypes, domesticating Cass, gaslighting Young Justice, and plotting the Joker's death Tim had no free time left for pop culture and gossip rags. Figuring out whatever Oracle did to Arkham took precedence over the meme life, as sad as that was. Her coding was a nightmare, but he was close to a breakthrough. He could feel it.

Oh, to be back in the Batcave hissing over algorithms. That would be much more enjoyable than schmoozing with these people. Or better yet, he could be running across the country with Bart again, seeing how many things they could get away with before Young Justice finally clued about Tim's dragonness. He'd been dragged home kicking and screaming from their party by Dick far too soon last time, and he hadn't been able to arrange another Great Escape yet. (Max and Bruce had teamed up, and they were the *worst)*.

Someday he'd get away. They couldn't stop him forever, and now that Tim had a taste of gaslighting, he wasn't going to give it up. It tasted almost as good as soy sauce on vanilla cake. Nobody had told Tim it was so much fun! He'd have done it on purpose way earlier if he'd known. How could Bruce keep this from him? Same with Dick and Alfred. The Wayne-himbo act had nothing on bamboozling Young Justice.

To be fair, none of them were stupid. Well, the jury was out on Kon, but that was only because he wouldn't stop looking at his reflection. Tim was just too good at hiding what he was, even when he tried to make it obvious by smiling with too many teeth or bending his limbs in the wrong direction. He and Bart were brainstorming other tactics since these were obviously too subtle.

Tim eyed Dick's pockets in annoyance. Said brainstorming would be much easier if his phone hadn't been confiscated. Tonight's gala couldn't end soon enough.

They were in a big, glass arboretum near Robinson Park. Everything was glittery and fancy but looked pretty much the same as every other gala. Bleh, boring. Tim was grateful that Jack never made him go to these, it was the definition of blah. He wasn't even allowed to eat anything interesting. The tiny hors d'oeuvres barely filled him up, and there wasn't blood on them or anything.

"This blows," he grumbled, nibbling on another cracker. "Protoge Day was way funner. These goons can't plan a party to save their lives."

Even the Rogues wouldn’t bother to attack this party. They’d probably fall asleep just walking through the doors.

“Thanks Timmy, I’m glad you liked that activity,” Dick said. “We’ll have to do it again.”

“Yeah!”

Tim really hoped Gar would be there. Hmm, maybe if he just pretended this was an extension of Protoge Day, it’d be more bearable.

Five minutes later, Tim retracted that wishful thought. This place was evil. It was full of *fawning people.*

"I must say, he is an adorable chap," a rich guy said. “Fits right in with your aesthetic!”

"So generous of your family to look after him while the Drakes are abroad," a lady gushed, then *pinched his cheek.*

"I daresay, he's a marked improvement over the last stray," an oil tycoon sneered.

Tim splashed *that* man with sparkling cider, then stomped on his toes and hissed at him for talking badly of Jason, using all of Janet's favorite death threats.

Dick pulled him away eventually, apologizing loudly to the pale-faced man. As soon as they were out of earshot he whispered "Good job" and told Tim to do it again next time someone dissed Jason.

Tim gave a final hiss out of principle and glowered at the floor. Dick didn’t have to tell him twice. That jerk was lucky to still have all his limbs. Nobody made fun of Jason on Tim’s watch. He’d happily soak anyone who spoke badly about him.

Ten minutes and three glasses of sparkling cider later, Tim was running out of liquids to splash people with. He stared at his empty glass in despair; humanity was a lost cause.

“I hate this. Can we go home already?” He grumbled. How did Janet not kill people whenever she was in public? This was torture.

"Just a little longer, you’ve done a great job. Bruce will make his speech and then we're out of here," Dick said soothingly.

"Epic. Let's get Steph on our way home," Tim said. "We can all go the Waffle House in Crime Alley."

Dick muttered something in Romani and shook his head.

"Steph has a mom who will be upset if we take her out too late," Dick said. "If you want to see her, we'll figure something out during daylight hours."

Boo, Dick was no fun. Those parenting books were him turning into a killjoy adult.

He was right about Crystal though. She had been helicoptery about Steph ever since she found out her daughter stayed out till dawn in the bad part of town with Tim, raiding all the waffle stores in the area and critiquing syrup quality.

Whatever. Tim would just throw a rock at her window later or something. He'd bring Cass and brainstorm more vigilante accessories for her. Steph was almost finished with Cass’s Black Bat costume and it was delightfully terrifying.

"Come on, let's go stand by Bruce and look pretty," Dick said, nudging Tim into motion, "Vicki Vale will have a conniption if she can't get a family photo of us to make fun of."

Tim let himself be dragged onto the stage and stared unimpressed at the crowd of rich people below. This was only his second gala, and Tim had already his fill for a lifetime.

Bruce stepped forward and started blabbering about some kind of charity project. Tim tuned him out on reflex, looking for something to amuse himself with.

That something turned out to be a red dot appearing on Dick's chest, like a sight from a laser tag gun.

Tim didn't waste time thinking of more comparisons. He and Janet had the unfortunate habit of *loving* bright specks of light. When Tim was a toddler, Jack had worn him out for bedtime by having him chase a laser point around the entire mansion, and Tim wasn't ashamed to say that he hadn't grown up since then. Shiny red light? He had no choice but to pounce for it.

He leapt so quickly that he got airborne and tackled Dick to the ground in a flurry of limbs. Dick wheezed under him, gasping Tim's name in alarm, but Tim was already scrambling to his knees to see where the dot would appear next.

There was a loud pop as something embedded itself in the wood paneling above their heads, then someone started screaming.

Tim blinked in surprise.

Oh . So, not a laser tag gun, then.

***

An hour later, reporters and cops were still swarming the building. Bright lights and shouting filled the air. If Tim were being honest, it didn't seem much different than when the gala started. There was just more crime scene tape now, and a lot more shouting.

He kicked his feet against the hood of a cop car while Bruce and Dick talked to the commissioner, phone finally back in hand. He was halfway through a level of CandyCrush, tuning out the world around him. His statement was finally over, and he was ready to blow this popsicle stand. The GCPD had asked him forty-seven questions about what he'd seen, noticed, and thought during the incident, and that was forty-seven questions too many.

Commissioner Gordon was less than impressed when Tim admitted he'd just wanted to catch the bright light. Dick said something loudly about Tim's good reflexes and sense of humor. Bruce just hummed consideringly and muttered something about buying a penlight.

"I see . . . But regardless of that," Gordon said, giving them all strange looks, "Someone seems to be targeting you. Lay low, hire extra security, *don't* make public appearances for a while. We'll be in touch about the investigation, but it could take time."

"Not too long, I hope," Bruce said. "I have a yacht party I'm attending next week."

"Mr. Wayne, someone just tried to shoot your son."

Dick laughed airily, slinging his arm around Bruce. "Water under the bridge, commish. I'm fine. Besides, you're on the case, right? I can count on you to keep me safe."

Tim was impressed. Dick had been raised in Gotham, had his parents murdered by the mob, and literally worked as a beat cop in Bludhaven, but he managed to sound as ditzy as Bruce at the drop of a hat. What an actor.

"Right," Gordon said. He took a swig from his water bottle, probably wishing it was alcohol. "Right. Of course."

"How's Babs doing?" Dick continued. "It's been so long since we hung out. Does she still do that computer stuff?"

Ok, not doing this. Tim had endured enough small talk at the gala, it wasn't allowed to seep into the one part of the day he was actually vibing with.

"Can we go home already?" he said loudly. "I'm bored."

"Good," Bruce said. "Being miserable builds character."

Tim scowled. That was such a Jack-ism.

Another officer ran up, handing an envelope to Gordon. The commissioner glanced at it, squinted closer, and frowned.

“What is it?” Bruce asked.

“Your sniper left a note,” Gordon said grimly, holding up the card.

Tim craned his neck to get a better look at the thing. He only got a brief glimpse, but he saw three photographs; one of Dick, Tim, and Jason. Jason’s had a big X scribbled in red, and Dick had a target painted on it. Tim’s was blank, which was kind of a bummer.

He was disappointed (you’d think since they went to all the trouble to doctor the rest of the pictures they’d have made his fancy as well), but it had Bruce and Dick looking thunderous.

“I know you’re not used to showing caution, but please take this threat seriously,” Gordon said. “Dick, you’re lucky your bro — that Tim was there, but you can’t count on luck for everything.”

“Thank you for the warning, we'll be careful," Dick said tightly. Bruce clasped his shoulder, staring at the X ’d-out photo of Jason. His Brucie act was slipping.

Tim hopped off the hood and straightened his gala jacket. "Yeah. Now that I know the death threats are real, I can prepare for them. This sniper won’t stand a chance.”

The adults froze.

"Threats. Plural," Bruce said.

Tim nodded. "Yeah, we've been getting letters in the mailbox all week. I thought they were about our extended warranty or something."

Before his and Bart's great escape from Wayne Manor, he'd gotten several random letters from an unknown sender. It hadn't seemed important so he'd forgotten about it until now, but that was just life. Chilling with his new friend had seemed much more interesting.

Tim had thought it was weird that they'd been written out of cut-out magazines and said stuff like "sleep with one eye open" and "I will cut off your fingers one by one and feed them to you," but that could have just been a new marketing scheme. Gotham was always doing weird, avant-garde stuff like that. Once a salesman had added smoke pellets to his ads for visual effect. (Or had that been one of the Riddler's terrorist attacks? Tim always lost track).

Jim Gordon stared at him like he'd claimed to be a flat earther. Bruce was doing his controlled breathing. Dick looked like he wished the sniper had shot him after all.

"I think I'm going to have to ask you some more questions," Gordon said at length.

Tim scanned the nearby windows for sniper guns. Empty, sadly. Shame, he'd have liked an excuse to leave this conversation. Him and his big mouth.

Luckily, his interrogation interview was short-lived because Gotham (sweet, foul-smelling, crime-ridden Gotham) was full of more pressing matters than the death threats Tim had been recycling all week.

Unluckily, that pressing matter ended up being disarming Bruce's car, which had a bomb on its underbody and a timer loudly ticking down.

Gordon grumbled about not being paid enough for this job (understatement of the century), Dick and Bruce were whispering over how someone had bypassed the car's sensors to install that in the first place, and reporters were going nuts over the double murder attempt.

Tim flopped onto the asphalt, letting oil and grit get all over his Armani suit. Looks like it'd be even longer before he was back home. This night would never end.

He had to hand it to this assassin though; they were committed.

***

Tim resented lectures. They were always so condescending. If he wanted to be frowned at and treated like a lesser lifeform, he'd go back to high school. Bruce had no right to treat him like an idiot just because there were a few letters he hadn't sorted properly.

"Tim, they were graphically talking about blowing you up," Dick said. "It was clearly a death threat."

"Half the ads in Gotham look like that!" Tim would know. He'd been in charge of Drake Manor's mail for years. "Besides, Rogues do the same thing. I just tuned it out,"

Plus, the letters had smelled weirdly familiar. He'd puzzled over why for over an hour, then chucked them into the garbage when he couldn't figure it out.

"I don't understand how you're both the smartest and dumbest person I know," Dick said. "How have you not died?"

Tim stared at Dick like *he* was the idiot. He was a dragon. 'Nuff said. Besides, if it had been a real threat, the sender would have acted on it, not played one-sided penpal with Tim for a week. Besides, everyone foreshadowing murder should know better than to do so through snail-mail. It was the 21st century, an email would have been way faster.

"Acted on it. Right, like trying to snipe us at the gala?" Dick said drily.

Oh, that was a good point.

"This killer is way too dramatic," Tim grumbled, arms crossed. "I still can't take them seriously."

It felt like the sniper was just toying with them, wanting to see them panic. If they were serious about killing the Waynes, Tim liked to think they'd actually have set off that car bomb on Bruce's Rolls-Royce. But they didn't because they were a loser.

If you were going to kill someone, being theatrical about it was stupid. That just gave prey time to escape . . . Although Tim was guilty of occasionally playing with his food, so perhaps he shouldn't judge. And the letters *had* been kind of cool.

Anyway, while the murder attempts were annoying, they weren't the worst part of this. No, that crown was worn by the security team Bruce was required to have with him in public and insisted on following Tim and Dick around Gotham like glorified ducklings.

Dick wore the burden well, but Tim was appalled. He was a dragon, he could defend himself! He didn't need a swole gym bro with a Bluetooth earpiece hovering over him and Steph, saying he'd "be cool" and not harsh their "lovebird mello."

(Tim and Steph couldn't decide if the attempt at slang was hysterical or better repressed forever.)

Tim complained about this at length to Cass. She was the only one who understood him. His oasis in this desert of stupidity.

She blinked at him, halfway done chewing on a Twizzler.

"You… dragon?" She said.

She sounded *confused* . But there was no way, *come on* —

Tim thunked his head on the attic floor, done with everything. Why was this his life? Cass literally eavesdropped through the walls, how had she not overheard any of Jack's Skype calls or Dick’s yelling about humanization?

"Yes, Cass, I'm a shape-shifting lizard with wings. I like to eat raw meat, preferably alive, and can breathe fire," he grumbled. "I don't know why people have so much trouble understanding that!"

He and Bart had fun terrorizing Young Justice with this, but this was getting ridiculous. Tim's human act was just too good these days. It was a cross he had to bear.

Cass patted his head and — wow, Jack was right, healing power. Tim melted into it.

"There there," Cass said, "No sad. Dragon make sense. Very you."

Oh sweet validation, was that you? It had been too long.

Cass stood up and finished her Twizzler, then cocked her head. "Rat in wall. Close. Hungry?"

"Am I ever," Tim said, pushing himself to his feet. “That gala had the worst food.”

It stuck to his stomach lining like a cringe memory from middle school. He hadn’t eaten since. Some rodents would be great at getting the taste out.

"Tell you where, but," she crossed her arms smugly, "take me fly."

Tim's lips parted into a smile. “Is this blackmail?”

“No, this is nego…Neegotiatoon.”

Clever girl.

Tim stuck his hand out. “Deal.”

If she’d found out a few weeks ago, Cass would have just thrown him out a window and jumped on him to get airborne. Using her words was huge progress. Tim was happy to agree to her terms. Plus,

flying with a hoard member sounded like the perfect way to blow off steam until this sniper got caught. Cass would probably like loopy loops and plunges.

Cass grinned. She had a feral edge that Tim doubted would ever go away. It made him happy not to be the only wild one here. This is why they were soulmates.

“Come on,” she said, and showed him where the rats were.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know why, but I’m obsessed with there being a Waffle House in Crime Alley. They’re not really that far north, but that’s only because God knew if the chain had access to New England maple syrup it would be too powerful. I’d become one with its asbestos filled walls, greased to perfection from the sheer amount of bacon in my system.

BTW I’ve had soy sauce on vanilla cake. Tim’s right, it’s not bad.

Meanwhile:

Customs: Anything to declare?
Jason: Oh so many things, but for the sake of time I'll keep it brief. It all started a dark and stormy night three years ago—
Customs: We didn't actually mean—
Jason *getting all his monologues in before he gets to business because he DID learn from Talia, okay?*: —I was young, dumb, and easy to trick, but not anymore. You see, that night was the mere prologue to the telenovela that is my life—
Custos: Sir you can go through. Please go through. PLEASE.
Jason; I'm not even done with the opening act.
Customs: My shift ends in five minutes sir. I have a family to get back home to.
Jason: WELL I DON’T! My family is metaphorically dead to me, like I was literally dead to them. Now, as I was saying . . .

Also:

Here is a joke opening paragraph to Jason’s Mansfield Park fanfic. This is not indicative of Jason’s ability to write. This was created solely to traumatize RavenGranger. Her shriek of horror tells me I succeeded. For all you folks who’d read My Immortal, you know why.

Hi my name is Fanny Darkness Ebony Raven Price and I have long ebony black hair (that’s how I got my name) with purple streaks and red tips that reaches my mid-back and icy blue eyes like limpid tears and a lot of people tell me I look like Elizabeth Bennet (AN: if u don’t know who she is get da hell out of here!). I’m not related to Vincent Price but I wish I was because he’s a major fuckin’ hottie. I’m British but my teeth are straight and white. I have pale white skin. I’m also a barista, and I work at a lofi cafe called The Daily Grind in Gotham where I’m in the first year of university (I’m eighteen). I’m a goth (in case you couldn’t tell)

and I wear mostly black. I love Hot Topic and I buy all my clothes from there. For example today I was wearing a black corset with matching lace around it and a black leather miniskirt, pink fishnets and black combat boots. I was wearing black lipstick, white foundation, black eyeliner and red eye shadow. I was walking outside Gotham. It was snowing and raining so there was no sun, which I was very happy about. A lot of thugs stared at me. I put up my middle finger at them.

6/18/24 UPDATE! There's now a one-shot of Jason's time in Nanda Parbat. It is part 3 of the series, but you can also find it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/56756113

Puberty at its Worst

Chapter Summary

Tim: What is this feeling, so sudden and new?

Tim *wheezing, feverish, suffering*

Tim: Seriously, what is it?

Chapter Notes

Me: My flight is delayed. I'll just edit this chapter a bit while I wait. Probably won't finish though, haha.

five hours later

Me: Well, plane's still not here. RAVEN, WANT TO BETA FOR ME REAL QUICK?

Raven: …I have a life.

Raven:

Raven: But okay.

Me: *cheers*

Hours later, my flight canceled and my exhaustion unparalleled

Me: I used to have a life once… then I took an arrow to the knee.

Basically I was trapped in an airport for the entire day, trauma-bonded with the rest of my flight (there was a dance number and impromptu song when it got delayed another hour, very inspired), and had the house of cards that were my travel plans collapse in on itself. I'm hesitant to count this toward my Explosion list since nothing literally blew up, but seeing as how my travel plans did metaphorically I think it gets an honorable mention at least.

Anyway, I had lots I free time, so this chapter got its edit super fast. RavenGranger, almighty beta, holder of the brain cell, wielder of slightly more common sense, and owner of significantly more moss than me (👀) gave this a look over, so huzzah!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Having someone targeting the Waynes was annoying, but at least Tim had patrol to look forward to. Bruce and Dick never freaked out when rogues were murdering them in their costumes, so the streets were becoming a much more relaxing place these days.

Well, usually, but not tonight. Tim was feeling achy and sore, and the heat kept getting to him. It wasn't fair. Reptiles were supposed to thrive at high temperatures! Why must his joy be stifled by the weather?

Tim wiped his forehead. It was dark, but Gotham felt stifling. Night was supposed to be *cold* , why had nature forsaken him? August was officially the worst month.

"You doing okay, bud?" Dick said, nudging him from where he was laying. "You've been off all night."

"I'm fine," Tim said, readjusting his binoculars. "This is just boring."

They were staking out the Maroni family's weapons warehouse. There had been some weird movements in the gangs recently, and Bruce was determined to get to the bottom of it. Sometime tonight a deal was supposed to happen, and they were all in position to put it in the ground, but so far it had just been two hours of laying on a rooftop watching equally bored employees do the rounds. Tim wanted action so bad it was driving him crazy. He'd give anything to swing through the air and whisk the perspiration away on the night breeze. He was pretty sure he'd sweated through his uniform.

"Just be glad B still has you cleared for action," Dick said, "I swear, it's like he can't say no to you."

"It's been *weeks,* N, gosh," Tim huffed. You bite *one* hero, and suddenly you're a menace to society. Hadn't the apology letter been enough?

"Well, there's nothing wrong with taking more time to reflect — don't look at me like that, I'm trying to be a good role model for you," Dick said as if Tim hadn't seen him pickpocket cops

during his Robin era. “Besides, after those death threats, you’re lucky Bruce and I didn’t lock you in a tower. I was tempted to lock you in the attic or something. There’s plenty of space up there.”

“Whatever, you’re making too big a deal out of it,” Tim said, turning back to the deal. A few letters and a bullet not even aimed at him weren’t anything to fuss over, especially since that was over a week ago. Actually, if the sniper tried again, Tim would be happy to chase more lights around. Bruce and Dick were overreacting, as usual.

They knew he could handle himself, it was just empty nest syndrome from losing Jason. Janet and he had finally figured it out; humans were the opposite of dragons. They *liked* their spawn. Having a youngling nearby apparently made them happy, so Tim put up with their hovering (to a point). Silly hoard.

“B’s in the back, he just saw a car pull up,” Nightwing said, back to business. “I’ll go via the window, you come in from the roof.”

“ *Yes,* ” Tim hissed, scrambling to his feet.

He immediately got a headrush and almost tripped off the building. Dick grabbed his shoulder and steadied him.

“Robin, seriously, are you okay?” he asked.

Tim blinked spots out of his eyes. Another bead of sweat dripped down his face. “I’m *fine*, N, now hurry up. Those criminals aren’t going to punch themselves.”

Dick pursed his lips but gave a jerky nod. Tim rolled his eyes as they swung over to the warehouse. Worrywart.

It was a simple matter to smash through the skylight and draw the crooks’ attention while Batman and Nightwing came in from the other entrances. Tim’s new cape was almost as heavy as B’s and made an excellent shield for bullets. Tim was also great at twisting around shots in ways that made people want to throw up, and disarming them with his staff while they gagged. Nothing made him happier than a good brawl.

While he embraced his intrinsic bloodlust, Bruce and Dick shut down the heavy machinery on the ground floor and cuffed the ringleaders.

It was an easy fight, all things considered. Tim was a little disappointed that there wasn't a Rogue directly involved. Arkham's new security protocols were annoyingly efficient, and even though Tim *knew* the Riddler could escape, the man was dutifully attending his therapy appointments. Where was the panache? The challenge? Black Mask's drug operations were 5/10 on the crime aesthetic chart at best; there was no satisfaction from stopping them. Tim was running out of ways to get a good adrenaline rush, and it was making him antsy.

Another wave of dizziness caused him to stumble. Maybe antsy wasn't the right word. Queasy? Nauseous? Overheated?

He leaned against a crate of grenade launchers and wiped his forehead again, flipping through his mental thesaurus to find the right word. Breathing was harder than usual. He wanted to throw up.

Bruce looked over at Tim from where he was photographing weapon serial numbers and abruptly stood. "Robin?"

Tim waved him off as he approached, but the spots were back and there was a sick feeling in his stomach that reminded him of the time he'd eaten mud from Gotham Bay. He swallowed back bile.

Bruce's lips were pursed in what most people would call a terrifying visage. Some of the semi-conscious thugs averted their eyes and whimpered. Tim, meanwhile, wanted Bruce to get ahold of himself. Did he want all of Gotham to see him looking so worried?

"You're burning up," the Dark Knight said.

Tim blinked, unsure when Bruce had taken off his gauntlet to feel his forehead.

"Robin, you said you were fine earlier," Dick said, jogging over. Police sirens wailed in the distance, and the warehouse was full of twist-tied crooks.

“I *am,* ” Tim said, leaning into Bruce’s hand. It was cool and not sweaty. Bliss.

“You can barely stand. I’m calling the Batmobile,” Dick said, already pulling open his wrist computer.

The sound of its clicking keys made Tim giggle. They sounded like — like — like . . . he’d been going somewhere with that train of thought. Too bad his brain had fallen out of the cargo bay into a ditch on the side of the tracks. Whatever witty comparison he’d uncovered was now lost to the ether. He giggled again, then groaned. Note to self, giggling was now forbidden.

“You’re sick,” Bruce explained. “Seems to be a fever.”

Tim blinked slowly. That was weird. He didn’t get sick — never had. Was this what it felt like? He didn’t like it. Tim wanted to cancel this subscription.

Tim grimaced as another wave of heat made him shiver. He breathed heavily, trying to catch his breath as his vision tunneled. Then Tim’s knees buckled, and he felt Bruce catch him. Was that Dick swearing in the distance? He sounded far away.

Tim’s last thought as he passed out was that at least Alfred couldn’t lecture him about shredding the parlor’s heirloom tapestry. It was illegal to get mad at sick people. Still, Get Out of Jail Free cards weren’t supposed to suck so much. Tim called hacks.

***

Tim officially hated his life. He’d had a 103-degree fever for three days, and it showed no sign of letting up. Apparently, that was very dangerous, but mostly it just sucked. Heat rose off his skin in waves, clouding his brain and sapping his strength. Rational thought had gone the way of the dodo until very recently. Forget flesh wounds; maulings had nothing on icky, queasy internal warfare. Tim was in constant agony from his bones stretching and all his muscles warping even though he just laid in bed all day. Not to mention his skin itched so much he wanted to tear it off.

. . . Huh. That symptom seemed important. Too bad he couldn't remember *why.*

As his condition worsened, Tim started shifting in and out of his dragon form to ease his discomfort. He sprawled on his bed, bones twisted into disturbing half-transformations as everything inside him rearranged itself. Dick said he was starting to understand why people got creeped out by his own contortions, but Tim buried his head into his pillow and tuned him out. He didn't have the energy to quip. They were lucky he could even keep down Alfred's chicken broth.

"Hey champ, it's okay. Leave that on," Bruce said, replacing the wet cloth on his forehead.

Tim cracked open a slitted eye and huffed. It wasn't his fault his body was doing a remix of that Katy Perry song. Temperature regulation was a lie, and the cloth felt *wrong.* He wanted it and his skin *off.*

That thought wouldn't leave him. By day four, Tim actually started scratching his skin off, chasing relief. Alfred took to wrapping his claws in thick bandages, but there were still deep grooves on his scales. Tim felt like he was being eaten alive by fire ants.

At that point, Bruce called Jack. Leslie had prescribed pain meds and fever medicine, but the Waynes were worried they wouldn't work with Tim's biology, especially since he was only just starting to be lucid again. Jack's Dragon PDF mostly covered anesthesia and pain medication, not common colds and hatred for external organs, hence the emergency phone call.

"My last request . . ." Tim muttered as Bruce frantically dialed the Drakes' travel number. "Don't let Dad come back."

"Last request? You're not dying!" Dick said, giving Tim's hand a firm squeeze. "Everything is going to be okay, Timmy."

It sounded like Dick was trying to convince himself of that.

"Don't let him come home, he's annoying," Tim grumbled. "Always smothers me. I'm not weak."

"No, you're one of the strongest people I know," Dick said, "but it's okay to lean on others now and then —"

Tim rolled his eyes, then groaned as he got vertigo.

“Jack?” Bruce said, holding the phone flush against his ear. “Jack, I need you to sit down. We need your help. It’s about Tim.”

***

Tim could have told Bruce the call would end in disaster. Alas, nobody listened to him. They seemed to think he wasn’t a reliable source of information. You fail to mention you’re a dragon *one time* and throw out a few random letters and everyone makes a big deal over it, honestly.

Jack, as per usual, was panicking and screaming into the cell so loudly that Tim heard him from across the room. A lot of it was “Oh my God, don’t let him go toward the light” and “Do you need a surgeon? I know all the surgeons” and “Who did it? Who hurt my baby? I’ll sic Janet on them —”, etc. The Waynes couldn't get a word in edgewise for over five minutes.

Classic Jack. His soothing shouts were the lullaby of Tim’s childhood, and they relaxed him right up.

He nibbled on saltines while Bruce calmed Jack down and explained the fever situation, eventually switching to video call. Jack made a weird, tea-kettle sound when he saw Tim in agony, sprawled out and bandaged, so Tim gave him a little wave.

“I don’t know what to do. Neither he nor Janet have ever been sick,” Jack confessed. “I’m a failure as a father!”

Bruce and Dick quickly assured him he wasn’t. Tim just sipped the soda Alfred gave him, feeling very sleepy. Silly Jack, parents had no obligation to keep children alive. Hadn’t Janet taught him anything?

The Waynes were a bad influence on Jack, undoing years of Janet’s careful teachings about dragons. Tim felt for her; Jack had been so close to understanding and now it was for naught.

“So what’s causing this? What do we do?!” Dick said, twisting his hands through his hair in distress.

Tim briefly contemplated jumping out the window and flying to Mammoth Cave for some peace and quiet. All three men were vibrating in distress over Tim’s inevitable demise, and he wasn’t going to pull them out of it. Comforting people was literally worse than whatever hell his body was currently going through.

Luckily, that was when Janet walked past, dressed in evening wear with her hair pulled into an elegantly curled plait. Unruffled, unbothered, and unconcerned with the world.

“Honey, Tim is dying!” Jack sobbed.

Janet glanced at Tim’s huddled, pain-ridden form. “Nonsense, he’s fine. It’s just his first molt.”

She wandered away and sat by the hotel vanity, putting on large amounts of jewelry that Jack had probably bought her for their anniversary.

“He’s not — but the fever —” Jack said.

“Perfectly natural. He is about that age. Juveniles need room for more spikes.”

Dick sank to the floor, clutching his chest. “Oh, thank goodness. It’s just a dragon thing.”

Tim wrinkled his nose. *Just?* He was in pain — agony, even! — and he was still covered in icky skin, which was just salt in the wound.

“Can you tell me more about molting, Mrs. Drake?” Bruce asked, looking much calmer now that they had an actual diagnosis.

They didn’t need her to talk. *Tim* knew about molts. He’d just forgotten he was due for one soon. Whoops. That probably wouldn’t go over well if the Waynes found out though, so he ate his crackers in silence and sulked.

“I told you, it's Janet,” she said. “And there’s nothing to say. His hide is too small for his body, so it's peeling off. I expect there will be another one in the near future. If he survives this one, that is. Juveniles grow so fast.”

“If?” Jack squeaked.

Technology was a marvel: Three thousand miles and a bad satellite connection away, and the signal still managed to show the blood drain from his face. Tim had to hand it to the WE research department; they knew how to design a cellphone.

Janet clasped a heavy opal necklace and made her way over to the screen. “Oh yes, it is quite unpleasant, but he’s my son. He’ll endure, but it would be wise to watch out for other dragons. We do love devouring each other.”

Tim hummed. Now *would* be the perfect time for a Middle-Eastern dragon to break in and kill him. Janet was so nice for pointing that out.

“So he *is* in danger?” Dick said, eyes as wide as dinner plates. “How do we —”

Janet didn’t even let him finish his sentence before abruptly ending the Skype call. Tim once again applauded his mother for not putting up with any nonsense. She’d said her piece and just left. What a boss.

The Waynes stared at the “Rate your call!” pop-up for a few seconds as if they couldn’t comprehend the audacity of someone hanging up on them. This was definitely karma for how Bruce treated the JLA on conference calls.

“Well, at least the situation is clear,” Alfred commented, bringing in more snacks for Tim. “It seems there isn’t much else to do but wait, unless you have anything to share, Master Tim?”

“No, I’m good,” he said. “But if someone tries to kill me, can I eat them? I need calories.”

He was ignored, as usual. Alfred just said he’d make him more soup. Tim didn’t want soup. Just because the stock was made out of bones didn’t make it an acceptable meat replacement. This wasn’t fair; being sick was supposed to be an excuse for him to be pampered. Tim wanted a refund.

Bruce started pacing, muttering about contingencies and research on nonhumans. Dick was holding Tim’s hand again, reassuring him that they wouldn’t let him die and that there wouldn’t even be a need for murder because *nobody would get past the Waynes.*

Tim loudly crunched on another cracker and wished they’d just leave him alone. Molting was bad enough without his hoard fretting like this.

***

It took two more days for the fever to leave completely and another week for his molt to finish. Tim spent all of it in bed sleeping and ignoring Dick and Bruce as they hovered. Alfred was sensible enough to deliver meals and leave him be, but the others didn’t get the hint. Dick had inflicted Dragon Tales on him, and Tim still hadn’t forgiven him for it. That show was a mockery of his species and it needed to burn. Bruce just sat there and brooded (tolerable), but whenever Tim whined, he’d get concerned, which wasn’t allowed. Tim wanted to be miserable, not make his favorite person sad. Unfair. Let him rot in peace. Meanwhile, Babs sent him memes and coding homework he was too tired to do, and Impulse sent armies of get-well memes and asked if Tim wanted him to sneak any animals into the manor to eat. Tim said yes, but Max caught Bart on the border of Louisiana before he could capture an alligator as per Tim’s request.

Thus, Tim languished, bemoaning his boring fate to Cass when she cuddled with him at night when nobody else was around.

“Idiot Tim,” she said, squishing his cheeks. “Feel better.”

Tim pouted. Nobody understood his pain. “If you really felt bad for me, you be miserable too, not having fun without me.”

“Love you, but no. Steph wants more waffles.”

“Betrayal!”

He never should have introduced the two of them. Everything was a mistake.

Oh well, at least Cass was happy. Steph was a questionably good influence that way. Tim suspected Cass wasn't bothering to hide her presence much these days. Ever since Steph finished the Black Bat costume, her confidence had shot up. At the rate she was going, it wouldn’t be long before Bruce noticed she was living here. Probably. Maybe. If Cass wanted him to.

When Tim asked her about it, Cass just smirked. “Have plan. Steph-approved plan.”

Which sounded *epic* and Tim demanded to be a part of it. As the Cass-whisperer, it was his duty.

***

By the time his molt ended, human school was already in session. Tim had missed the entire first week, which was a nice bonus. Better than that though was that Tim had finally had a growth spurt. He was now two feet longer in dragon form and three inches taller in his human one. Five foot four, finally. Take that, DNA!

Alfred made him stand against a doorway to mark his new height with a pencil, looking fond. Dick was happy that Tim was still short enough for him to prop his elbow on his head, and Bruce seemed to be having a minor existential crisis about his kids growing up. Tim caught him staring at Tim’s baby pictures with tears in his eyes. Why. Just *why?*

Whatever. Tim was just glad it was over. The last three days, he'd ended up shifting all the way into dragon form and clawing off all his scales. That had been fun and not as painful as predicted. Once the old ones were gone, his new hide glistened, ruby red and brilliant. Tim’s next molt would probably darken them, and by the time he was Janet’s age, they’d settle to their true color, whatever that'd be.

That was the fun thing about dragons; they didn’t commit themselves to one measly color. Pigmentation varied with age, diet, and a thousand other random things that Tim was too lazy to keep track of. When he was a baby, he’d been black and blue, but over time the pigment had faded into several other colors. Janet was jade, so there was a chance he’d end up as that, but molts were

unpredictable. Privately, he hoped he'd be onyx again so he'd match with Cass. Black Bat deserved color cohesion.

"It's too bad you didn't keep your old hide," Dick said. "It was gorgeous. Alfred wanted to make you a coat."

Tim gave Dick his best impersonation of a miffed Janet. "That's so gross, Dick. That was my *skin."*

He'd ripped his old scales to shreds, vindictively pleased to murder them a second time. It was justice for itching so much. Next step, melting them in the woods with industrial acid. Bruce had some lying around in the Batcave.

"Ok, ok, that's fine. It's just a waste," Dick said, hands up. "It's really sturdy and makes good armor."

Again, no. That was like keeping toenails to make a necklace out of. Tim refused to lower himself to something so disgusting. This was a line he wouldn't cross.

"This is your line?" Bruce deadpanned. *"This?"*

"I'm being oppressed!" Tim yelled to the ceiling. Cass would hear and sympathize.

***

Arguments about his scales notwithstanding, recovery went pretty well. Tim got to play hooky, chill with Cass, and preen over his pretty new scales. Once the last of the aches and pains went away in mid-September, he was cleared for patrol once more, and all was right with the world

"I didn't miss anything while I was sick, did I?" He asked Bruce and Dick. He was convinced they'd waited an extra week on purpose, the hypocrites. They *always* babied him.

Bruce and Dick looked at each other, shared a silent conversation, then shook their heads in sync.

“Nope, absolutely nothing,” Dick said. “Gotham’s as quiet as the grave.”

Which was a total lie, since the next time Tim went on the news the headlines were screaming about a lunatic leaving eight decapitated heads in a duffel bag at a police station.

Tim pouted over the Red Hood’s rapidly growing file and felt extremely offended. Those jerks! They were totally hogging all the good cases. He was going to complain to Cass *so much* about this.

Chapter End Notes

Jason has escaped the End Notes! What will he do now??? 😱

Tim is sick for several weeks (August into September), so he misses Jason’s bloody debut on Gotham. Poor kid, he would’ve loved it.

***BTW some people were confused over the timeline in Meanwhile in Nanda Parbat. Fun fact; there wasn't one. Jason's scenes don't technically line up with each Tim chapter, so Jason's been traveling/going through customs at his own pace the whole time. how long is that? You can decide. I am here for crack and fun, do not look to me for detailed itineraries. Especially now. Itineraries are against me... *stares sadly around airport*

Jack: We can't leave him all alone, Jan. Tim needs us!
Janet: You're right.
Jack: I— what?
Janet *packing her suitcase*: We must go back to Gotham immediately. We can "comfort" Tim.
Jack: I... wait. no. This is wrong. You just want to eat him while he's weak!
Janet: Nonsense. I love our son. I would never take advantage of him like that.
Jack: put the antique ax down, sweetheart. You're not going to eat Timmie.
Janet: You never let me do anything fun. 😑

***update: Pinkmagnolias wrote this AMAZING fic based off Jack and Janet's end note above. It's absolutely adorable and I'm OBSESSED. Everyone please go check it out, it's literally the most adorable and hilarious thing ever!
https://archiveofourown.org/works/48476623

Murder Most Fowl

Chapter Summary

Tim: There is an insane serial killer on the streets AND NOBODY TOLD ME?! You're all complete killjoys, hmph!

Chapter Notes

Me *anxiously boarding my return flight*: Please nothing go wrong.

gets home fine

Me: YES!

AC breaks, maintenance gaslights my apartment and still hasn't fixed it, temperature spikes and humidity follows me like the plague

Me: … Well played, Universe, well played.

Don't worry, I'm doing fine. And nothing is blowing up (yet), so there's that! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim had bones to pick with the Waynes, and he made his confrontation with them as dramatic as possible.

"Eight heads!" he screamed. "Eight! Didn't you think I'd want to see them?"

"Tim, you know we don't want you on sensitive cases —"

"There were so many! I could have eaten one and nobody would have noticed, but noooo —"

"Tim, you're not allowed to eat body parts," Bruce said tiredly. They'd been having this conversation a lot lately. "And the Red Hood is a new danger. We have to be careful how we

approach him —”

“I’m careful!” He hadn’t lived as long as he did without Bruce-levels of paranoia. They seemed to be forgetting that. “Bad humans. Bad!”

Tim grabbed the spray bottle and squirted both of them. Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose, water dripping from his hair, and muttered something about missing Jack. Dick nodded, equally soaked.

“Tim, put that down,” Bruce sighed.

Tim misted them with it again just to make a point.

“Look, buddy, I get it. You’re probably feeling hurt, and that’s understandable. We can talk about this,” Dick said, sounding *exactly* like a self-help book. “Going after a serial killer like this is too risky. That's understandable, right?”

“It’s literally the same thing we do every night,” Tim said. “All the rogues have double-digit body counts.”

“Ok, fair, but still, you get where we’re coming from, don’t you?” Dick said. “It’s just like with Jack. All we want is for you to be safe.”

Oh, not cool. Tim was a vigilante dragon that regularly wrestled with a cannibal crocodile hybrid and gangs of criminals in costume. There was *nothing* safe about their lifestyle, and they weren’t allowed to use his father as an example to make him stop. Tim had only listened to Jack because the man was one family tragedy away from becoming a supervillain, it was totally different. Besides, Tim loved Jack, of course he didn’t want to upset him —

Oh.

Well played, Dick.

Tim sighed dramatically. “ *Fine* then. I’ll let you two hog the fun serial killing crime lord case, but this isn’t over.”

“Of course not,” Dick said.

B grunted in relief, shoulder slumping a minuscule amount. Hmm, maybe Tim should have put up more of a fight. They needed a reminder of who was really in charge.

***

Of course, it turned out the Waynes' attempts to shield him were unnecessary and — more to the point — ineffective because only a week later they were all gathered at a brutal crime scene, staring down at several mutilated corpses left on top of an apartment building.

Boring patrols. Right. Tim needed to apologize to the universe, since it was *clearly* on his side.

He’d been on his way to hang with Spoiler and Black Bat near Robinson Park when he’d literally stumbled on the corpses while running across a rooftop. He’d thought he’d spotted a glimmer of red chrome, then he’d tripped over a dead body and almost broken his nose.

A proper dragon would have hunted down the killer on their own, but Tim had stupidly called in the cops out of habit, which in turn summoned the bats like moths to a flame. Unfortunately for him, they were less than a minute away, and once they realized the killer was gone, they stopped Tim from licking the crime scene like he wanted. Killjoys. Goodbye free food, hello judgy humans ruining his midnight snack.

“You two are the worst,” he pouted as Commissioner Gordon arrived.

“And *you* know the rules,” Bruce growled before stalking off to talk to his cop friend.

Tim stuck his tongue out after him, then frowned at the CSI peeps. The cops were doing what they always did at crime scenes. Tim wasn't sure what exactly that was supposed to be, since it looked like they were just wrapping stuff in tape and standing around, but to be fair he didn't really care.

Yes, he'd learned about forensics and CSI protocol with Batman (and even retained it!) but he usually tuned the GPD out. All that really mattered was that most of the officers looked as bored as he currently felt, therefore he felt united in common purpose with them.

But yeah, this wasn't going to end anytime soon. Tim texted Steph that he'd be late for the ice cream stand and that she and Cass should order without him since this might take a while. Stupid Red Hood, now Tim was missing out on fresh corpses *and* time with the girls. It'd be hours before he could leave here.

"You're not even supposed to be this close to Crime Alley," Nightwing said as Tim put away his phone. "We told you to stay by Main Street tonight."

"The call of ice cream was stronger," he said. "And I like this roof. It has a water tower."

A big, dilapidated one that hadn't been used in over ten years. It loomed dangerously over the roof entrance and the tiny electrical maintenance shack in the corner, shrieking like a banshee whenever the wind got too strong. When Tim was smaller, he would crawl inside and take great pictures of Jason kicking rapists in the nuts. Good times.

"We need to talk about you always breaking the rules," Dick said, like a hypocrite. "At least I'm here to play damage control. Remember, no snacks."

Tim rolled his eyes. "I wasn't gonna."

Lies. They'd been dismembered and beheaded. That was essentially à la carte. The entire roof smelled like blood and gore. Tim was totally going to ask for a candle with the same scent for Christmas.

Dick looked at him like he could read Tim's mind and put his hands on his hips, giving the dragon an Alfred-worthy look of disapproval.

"It was just going to be one bite," Tim grumbled, hunching his shoulders.

“Uh-huh. That’s still one bite too many.”

The dragon pouted and studied his fingers. It figured that whenever Tim found something remotely delicious on the streets, Dick was in town to ruin it.

Oh well. At least B understood him. Or was too awkward and done with the world to know how to handle anything except crime-fighting. Both were good in Tim’s book.

Speaking of the Bat . . .

Tim skipped over to where Batman was talking to Commissioner Gordon, cutting a striking figure against the city as he stood on the rooftop like a gargoyle. Even with the ugly water tower hanging over them, Bruce managed to look cool. Tim was very proud of him, Dick could learn a lot about intimidation from the guy. He wasn’t even *attempting* to look mysterious or brooding. Tim loved Dick's positive attitude and cheeriness, but it felt like a wasted opportunity not to grump on the world like Batman.

“Robin, get back here —” Nightwing sighed.

Tim hid under Bruce's cloak to evade Dick’s octopus arms. It was a tried and true tactic and worked 60% of the time. Plus, Bruce sometimes hid snacks in his belt.

" — Third time this has happened," Gordon said, raising an eyebrow when Tim peeked out of the cape. "This goes straight past vigilantism and into sadistic killing. The drug trade may be getting more controlled, but at what cost?”

"Hn," Batman said, focused on the bodies splayed around the roof. They almost made a picture.

Dick tried to pull Tim out from under the cloak, but Tim dodged, wrapped himself into the folds tighter, and stuck his tongue out.

". . . You're certainly chipper," Gordon remarked. He was always unsure of how to act around Tim. It was funny. "I guess grisly stuff must not phase you these days."

He glared at B as if that were somehow his fault.

Bruce just shrugged and absently ruffled Tim’s hair. He leaned into it on instinct, then caught himself and huffed.

"I'm bored, B," Tim said. "N won't let me look around even though I found the bodies first. I have dibs!"

"He looks hungry," Dick explained.

Bruce looked at the sky longsufferingly, then back down at Tim. "If I give you a snack, will you behave?"

Behave was code for "don't eat anything unsafe," "don't kill anyone," and "don't have any fun at all."

Tim nodded but kept his fingers crossed behind his back.

Bruce pulled out a stick of jerky and ruffled his hair again. “Stay close.”

“Seriously, B?” Dick groaned as Tim unfurled himself from the coat and ran toward the water tower. “This is going to be the Watchtower all over again.”

“It’ll be fine,” Bruce said.

“No, it won’t!”

Tim tuned out the bickering and focused more on reliving his childhood stalker memories. The water tower had been calling to him all night. There were no bodies on it, but it smelled like fresh blood and . . . paint? It was weird. He had to investigate.

"Oh, thank God, he's just climbing," Dick muttered as Tim scaled the ladder. It wasn't very tall, only about 20 feet, so it was easy for TIm's sharp ears to keep listening to the conversation below.

"You ever think about getting that kid help? He seems bright, but now and then he worries me." Gordon said.

"Robin is fine. We are handling him," B said. "Now, the Red Hood. You're positive this is him?"

"Yes, same as before. Drug dealers from the alley. Looks like they're from Black Mask's syndicate, given the tattoos. Given how many of his men he's killed, I'd say Hood has something personal against him . . ."

Tim frowned. The paint smell wasn't coming from the top of the water tower. Tim sniffed the air, this time paying more attention to the wind's direction. It must have been from the electrical outbuilding crammed onto the corner of the roof. Nobody had gone over there yet, so it was just a dark blob of shadows in the night.

He hopped down the ladder, causing the water tower to tilt dangerously, and flitted over to it. Nightwing glanced over, then turned back to Gordon. They were talking about Hood's new gang, which was definitely more important than playing babysitter.

Of course, from this end of the roof, Tim couldn't hear the details as well since the wind was stronger, but the smell was way stronger now. Overwhelming even. Tim's curiosity got the better of him and he turned the corner, just for a peek.

Ooh, secret crime scene. Jackpot .

He stuffed the jerky into his pocket and grabbed the treat left for him. Fresh and crunchy, just the way he liked it. The spray paint on it was gross, but Tim could digest stuff way more toxic than it so he wasn't worried.

He rolled his eyes back, lost in exquisite flavor, savoring each bite until he heard Dick call for him to come back. Crap, how long had he been lurking here?

Tim quickly stuffed the rest of his treat in his mouth and hurried back, wiping the blood off his face.

B was just finishing up with Gordon when Tim skidded to a stop by his side, cool as a cucumber.

" —That confirms he has an end goal, then," B grunted. "Given his pattern, we may be able to predict his next move and corner him, then —"

"Robin," Dick interrupted, " *what* are you eating?"

The adults stopped talking. Tim froze mid-crunch, then frantically chewed faster.

Dick got him in a headlock and squeezed open his mouth faster than Tim could hiss "sarsaparilla" and used his unfair circus skills to wrangle Tim into submission.

"Spit it out," he ordered, fingers in Tim's mouth.

"Nuh itfth mne!" Tim garbled. "Noooo!"

Dick scooped Tim's hard-earned food out. A puff of chewed feathers scattered into the air, brown and red and bloody.

Tim vainly tried to grab them before they hit the dirt. So much deliciousness *wasted.*

"Did you eat *a bird?"* Dick asked. He sounded both shocked, disappointed, and somehow unsurprised.

"Robin, we've talked about this," B said sternly.

"You mean he's done this more than once?" Gordon was so green even his mustache was a new color. "I thought Dent was lying."

Several other officers were staring at the feathers in horror. Tim wriggled more. The five-second rule was still in effect, he could reclaim them.

"Robin is adventurous, we're working on it," Dick said generously. He squeezed Tim's cheeks. "No more street animals! They could make you sick."

"No sicker than your fashion sense," Tim defended, "and it was mine!"

"I didn't see your name on it," Dick countered.

Ha! That tactic was ineffective this time around. Get wrecked, Dick.

"It did, it was a present for me!" Tim told him, "I earned them all fair and square."

"Them?" B said. "Where did you find this?"

Oh crap. Tim hadn't meant to use a plural. He was going to save the rest for later, but Bruce had his Detective Face™ on, so Tim wouldn't be able to bluff his way out of this. He'd just have to fight for his birdies the old-fashioned way.

"Over here," he said, finally slipping out of Dick's tentacle arms.

He led them all to the outbuilding by the water tower, gesturing at the glorious setup he'd found. Some of the other officers followed behind, curious about the fuss.

"See?" Tim said as he gestured to the previously undiscovered crime scene.

Gordon pulled out a flashlight to illuminate the dark corner. Huh, Tim had forgotten how bad human eyes were at everything. Once the light hit the wall, Gordon fumbled and almost dropped it.

Nailed to the wall were over a dozen dead robins spray-painted red, green, and gold. The birds had their wings clipped and feathers bent. Blood dripped onto the ground in thick globs, and in the center of the wall was a candid photo of Robin, complete with a knife shoved into its neck.

Underneath *that* was a crudely drawn trio of birds. One of them had been drawn flying from the nest, the second was in dismembered pieces, and the smallest one —directly below the photograph — had a target painted around it.

One of the officers turned around and gagged, looking dangerously close to vomiting. He must have liked birds or something. Tim ignored him and yanked another bird off its nail, since he liked them too.

"Isn't it awesome?" he said, chewing on its head as Bruce and Dick stared at the wall in horror. "It's a shrine in my honor! Ergo you can't take these from me, it's considered stealing, as stated in Gotham law, section —"

"That's great, glad you did your research," Dick said thinly, "go ahead and have it."

Tim blinked. "Just like that?"

“Just like that,” Dick repeated, “we have bigger things to worry about than your palette now.”

B gave a vague grunt of agreement, resting a hand against the wall to keep his balance.

Tim looked from them to the bird, then shrugged before swallowing it whole. Who was he to pass up an easy victory like this?

The other petty officer chose that moment to hurl as well, and Gordon muttered something about psycho teenagers. Tim picked a feather out of his teeth; poor humans were way too squeamish.

***

In what felt like a cheap parody of the gala, Tim was once again being questioned by Gordon, only this time as Robin.

“And you haven’t noticed anyone following you?” the man asked again.

Tim rolled his eyes. “Of course not. *I’m* the one who does the following. But Hood was here right before I came. I saw his helmet. Too bad he didn’t stick around, right?”

The photograph of Robin stabbed into the wall had been taken very close range, likely during one of Tim’s forays through Crime Alley. Given how hard it was for anyone except Cass to sneak up on him, that was concerning, but Tim figured Hood probably had a camera with a good zoom lens.

Nobody else shared his theory. No, they liked the whole “creepy serial killer with epic training” theory way better.

“Hood is a Joker copycat,” Dick muttered, currently holding the photo. “Do you think he’s trying to reenact something?”

Bruce’s expression could only be described as murderous. Tim inched closer fondly, even as Gordon took a large step back, looking troubled.

“This is why children shouldn’t be fighting crime,” the Commissioner said. “They become targets. I thought you’d learned that last time, Batman. Robin can’t be on the streets like this. Hell, he shouldn’t be on the streets, *period.* ”

Bruce inhaled sharply. Dick put an arm on his shoulders and glared at Gordon. This was an old argument, but usually it was implied rather than shoved into B’s face like a rotten egg. It was a dumb thing to bring up anyway, since Tim could handle himself just fine.

“Don’t worry, I’m tough,” Tim said, stepping between Gordon and Bruce. “I like violence.”

Gordon could rest assured that Tim was amazing at his job. Tim didn’t know how he’d get through human life without vigilantism. Fighting people in his human form was a fun challenge compared to annihilating them in his dragon one, and it was built-in quality time with his hoard. Literally, the perfect bonding activity, *and* he was keeping them safe.

“Kid, whoever told you being tough is enough is missing *several* screws, not to mention liking violence is —”

“Something I have in common with most policemen, I know,” Tim said, “but there’s no way I’m joining your squad, Gordo. I have a much better one with capes I already roll with, so you can stop trying to recruit me.”

He licked another speck of blood off his glove, then grabbed another bird off the wall to chew on. The gold paint tasted pretty good. He’d have to put a can of it in the fridge for his late-night snacks.

“. . . None of you are going to stop him from eating that?” Gordon sounded like Tim’s teachers whenever they talked to Jack about sending Tim to a correctional facility. “He’ll get sick.”

“No, he won’t.” Dick sighed, like that was a bad thing.

“You all need to stop food-shaming me,” Tim said. “My diet is sophisticated and healthy, not disease-prone or borderline zombie, so stop acting like it is.”

It was always “Tim, stop eating that,” “Tim, you’re making us violently ill,” “Tim, think of the children,” never “Wow, Tim, you’re a real inspiration for picky eaters. Your parents must love how excited you are to try new things.” Tim didn’t care what the Waynes ate, so they could at least get off his back. These were just birds. People ate birds all the time!

“Of course chum, our apologies,” Bruce said, patting him on the back. “We’ll do better.”

“Good,” Tim huffed.

Gordon mumbled “Unbelievable” and ran a hand over his face. None of the other police officers were getting within ten feet of Tim now. Tim bet they ate saltless pretzels and unflavored seltzer water; wusses.

“Robin’s eating habits aside, if the Bats are being targeted, we need a plan of action,” B continued. “This can’t go on.”

Dick and Gordon nodded while Tim finished chewing off a bird’s head. Those were some serious game faces, almost on par with Alfred’s when he found a stain in the carpet.

“The best we can do now is keep investigating. Robin will need to stay off the streets, of course —” Gordon began.

Tim choked on his bird.

Dick thumped his back, helping TIm spit out the beak and catch his breath. Once his airways were cleared, Tim glared at the commissioner. “I’m not going home. Are you crazy? I can totally handle Hood.”

"Look, kid," Gordon said, "I know you've been trained to run into danger headfirst, but Hood is a different animal. Let the adults take care of him."

Tim crossed his arms and fumed. After two weeks of Chad the gym-bro bodyguard making his civilian life unbearable, Gordon had a lot of nerve to think Tim would listen to him. The commissioner wasn't even hoard. Tim had zero incentive to do what he wanted, especially when the Robin suit was his only outlet for incredible violence.

"Serial killers are the best cases, and you can't stop me," he said. "Nobody can."

Well, nobody except Cass, but Tim was pretty sure she could fight God and come out on top. Besides, she’d back him up on this.

“Custody is a lie, and I’m too mighty to be contained by it,” Tim continued. “Besides, I’m not a kid. Just because I’m not full-size yet doesn’t mean I have to do what you say. I have complete control over everything I do.”

It was really tempting to say “neener neener” just to be extra annoying, but Tim resisted. Sticking his tongue out was much more mature.

Gordon huffed, gearing up to argue. Dick was rubbing his temples, weirdly pale as he kept glancing at the robin wall, eyes locked on the drawings of birds. If anyone needed to be taken off the streets, it was Nightwing. He got intense whenever something triggered his PTSD.

Bruce — the traitor — was unmoved by Tim’s declaration. He pulled something out of his utility belt and somehow arched an eyebrow even with the cowl on. “Is that a fact?”

Then he shone a penlight against the wall. White dot. Shiny. *Moving.*

Tim collided with the bricks a second later, almost breaking his nose for the second time that night. But Tim didn’t have time to worry about that, the light was moving again — wiggling!

"B, no fair!" He said, scrambling after it. Logically, he knew it wasn’t catchable. Slapping his hands on the pavement to trap it didn’t work, but *he'd almost had it that time, dammit —*

"Unstoppable indeed," Bruce said, criminally amused. He zigzagged the laser beam until Tim got dizzy trying to catch it.

Tim growled. This was why Jack was banned from using them on Tim and Janet. Bad human, this was mean!

“Had enough?” Dick chuckled.

“No, I hate you both,” Tim said. He rolled to his feet and pounced again anyway, this time just to be contrary.

The entire CSI unit was either laughing or looking extremely weirded out. Gordon was one of the laughers, chuckling so hard he had to clutch his side.

"Oh God, I wasn't expecting that," he said, wiping away a tear. "It's just like the Drake kid —"

Tim looked up in time to see Gordon's eyes widen with realization.

"Oh God," the commissioner said, staring at Tim in abject horror. Then he whipped to Bruce and Dick, taking in their hair, builds, and Batman's new penlight. "*Oh my God!"*

Yawns were contagious, but apparently so were cosmic epiphanies. Dick and Bruce looked at each other, then looked at Gordon who was looking at them, then all of them looked at Tim who was looking at them looking at him and . . . and basically there was a lot of looking, and Tim *still* hadn't caught the laser light.

Batman grabbed Commissioner Gordon by the shoulder and dragged him toward the stairs. "We need to talk."

"You —"

"Alone, Gordon."

“Sir?” One of the policemen called as B shoved Gordon into the building. “What do you want us to do?”

“Your jobs!” Gordon yelled.

The officers blinked like they weren’t sure what those were.

Tim grabbed a few more robins off the wall and stuffed them in his pocket, then Nightwing grabbed him by the scruff and hauled him after Bruce.

***

Pro: Nobody cared how many birds Tim was eating now, and they were very delicious.

"It was *you* after all these years? *You!?"*

"I have to put on an act in public. As you can see, it's effective."

"You told me you didn't want to hire bodyguards because they wouldn't go with your tie!"

Con: Gordon was reaching a falsetto, and it was giving Tim a headache. Also, he was almost out of birdies. Oh, and the lightbulb in the abandoned walk-in freezer they were hiding in kept flickering.

"Hey, at least now you know, right?" Dick smiled.

Wrong move. Gordon turned his considerable irritation onto him next. "And *you,* always playing dumb. How didn't I see it? You and Barbara were the smartest kids at school. People don't just turn into Miniature Brucie Waynes once they're eighteen.."

Dick chuckled awkwardly. "Well, you know, I'm a really good actor. And people kind of do?"

Gordon groaned and sat on a wooden crate, head in his hands. Tim offered him a wing and got his hand swatted away. Fine, be that way. More for Tim.

"And now you're roping another innocent child into this. Do the Drakes know? Gods, their son could *die,* Batman. Did you ever even think of —"

“Mom and Dad are super supportive. They said it’s a good outlet for me,” Tim said helpfully. “Are you *sure* you don’t want the rest of my bird?”

“You should say yes,” Dick said. “He never shares food.”

Gordon looked like he wanted to go back onto the roof and throw himself off the water tower. “You’re all insane. All of you. Everyone in my life has gone bonkers. At least Barbara is still sane. She’d know better than to get involved with this.”

Bruce and Dick exchanged long, silent looks, and then nodded in sync.

“Yeah, it’s great she doesn’t know,” Dick said. “Imagine that.”

Tim popped the rest of the bird in his mouth and wisely kept quiet.

Chapter End Notes

Raven: EVERYTHING IN GOTHAM IS ABANDONED!

Me: Uh yeah, why do you think everyone has abandonment issues?

Later that night

Dick *falling through the Clocktower skylight*: Heeeey Babs, funny story--
Barbara: I know, I saw your cam footage. This is hysterical.
Dick: …Really?
Barbara: Of course. I couldn’t have planned this better myself. Gaslighting Dad about how much I know is going to be hilarious. Are you in?
Dick:
Dick: YES I am. This is revenge for him actually believing I was a himbo for years. I mean seriously, he calls himself a detective!
Barbara: Dick, you ARE a himbo.
Dick: Shh, let me enjoy this.

ALSO GUYS GUYS! pinkmagnolias wrote an AMAZING recursive fic about Jack and Janet and you HAVE TO read it! It's so cute and funny and and and---------- And I literally do not have the words. Thank you pinkmagnolias, you are AMAZING and I hope only good things happen for you this week! 🥰❤️🥰❤️🤩🎶

You can find their wonderful fic in the "inspired by this" section, but here is the link for it as well. I'll be putting it in chapter 21's notes as well. 🥰
https://archiveofourown.org/works/48476623

Hoard Gone Batty

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Dick: Please stay away from Crime Alley until we catch Hood.

Tim: I have heard the council's decision, but since it is a stupid-ass decision I've elected to ignore it.

Dick: TIM NO!

Chapter Notes

Apologies for saying things weren't so bad last chapter. That jinxed us all and is probably why Ao3 got DDOS attacked… Oops. 0-0

Shout out to Ravengranger for being my awesome beta! She was super patient as I frantically tore apart and rewrote this entire chapter yesterday. What a saint. 😇

I also realized that Janet and Jack are lowkey my versions of Morticia and Gomez Addams... Only took me almost 70k to connect the dots, lol. Now I can't unsee it 😂

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim loved his life, even with the serial killer hunting him down. Red Hood was so low on his radar that he wasn't even an issue. Scratch that, Tim *loved* finding the yummy treats the man kept leaving him as creepy calling cards. As far as he was concerned, Hood could stalk him as long as he wanted. Delicious.

Bruce and Dick didn't share that opinion, however, and Tim was at his wit's end. Their concern was awful, evil, and totally ridiculous.

"You said I could patrol again, no takebacks!" Tim said.

"That was before a serial killer made you his target," Bruce replied.

They were gathered in the Batcave, supposedly getting ready for patrol. Instead, Tim had been ambushed by his humans and their ridiculous requests.

“I’m not staying home when there are criminals to eat,” he said. “This is infringing on my rights.”

He punctuated his irritation by jabbing B in the collarbone. The fact that Tim had to stand on his toes to do so only made him madder. How dare humans evolve to be so tall!

Bruce, the heavily armored behemoth that he was, was unmoved. “The last thing I want is to have to tell your father that we found your head in a duffel bag. No Robin until Hood is apprehended.”

Tim threw his hands into the air. “That’ll take forever!”

Hood was amazing at stealth. Not Cass-good, but definitely up there, and he'd been running rings around the Bats. Besides, who cared what happened to his body? Dead was dead. Janet would never treat him like this.

“Don’t worry, I’m staying at the manor until we get him,” Dick said. “It’ll be over before you know it, so just enjoy your break and focus on school.”

Tim crossed his arms and scowled. “This isn’t a break, it’s incarceration. Mom would never do this to me.”

“Your mom is not a good basis for parenting,” Dick said tiredly.

Lies and slander. Clearly, Dick needed to get his eyes checked.

“Look, I won’t even go near the Hood case,” Tim reasoned. “Just let me patrol. I’m sick of staying home.”

He’d *just* gotten ungrounded. No way was a paint-bucket-wearing crime lord ruining this for him. Tim understood why this case hit them so hard after Jason, but he wished they’d channel that

emotion into proper, respectable hatred instead of hovering over him like he was a newborn fawn. Tim could handle himself just fine, thank you. They should save the protectiveness for someone who needed it.

“Tim, this isn’t a punishment. Be reasonable,” Bruce said.

“I’m perfectly reasonable. You’re the ones being ridiculous.”

Personally, Tim didn't see how Red Hood targeting Robin was any different from Poison Ivy or Clayface going after him. Tim wasn't an idiot; he knew the Robin shrine he'd found was a weird headhunting thing. Whoever Red Hood was, he wanted to brutally murder and pin Tim up just like those birds.

Big deal. *Every* Gotham rogue wanted to do that. Probably some of Tim's teachers too. Hood wasn't special.

Bruce made one of those frustrated sighs that he and Dick had down to an art. “We just want you safe. You need to listen to us. No more childish behavior.”

Childish. After everything he’d done for them, they thought he was *childish!?*

“I am *not* a child,” Tim fumed. “I’m a lethal killing machine that can take care of myself. Hood doesn’t even bother me. Actually, he’s way better than you guys because *he* supports my diet. It’d be rude *not* to eat all those crunchable birds. Do you know how hard they are to catch? Because I do!”

“Tim, no,” Dick rubbed his eyes. “You’re missing the point.”

“No, I understand all the points. You two need to stop being so overprotective.”

He’d *told* them environmentalism was part of his Robin brand. How was he supposed to set an example for Gotham if he couldn’t reduce food waste via creepy death wall birds? They’d already

been reused, it was his job to recycle them. Poison Ivy would agree with him on this; he was positive.

“We’ll be as overprotective as it takes,” Bruce said sternly. “You are forbidden from patrolling Gotham until the Red Hood is brought to justice, and that’s final.”

He used the same dad-tone Jack did when Tim acted too dragon-like in public, but Bruce wasn’t allowed to because *Jack* was his dad and only *he* got dad privileges. Bruce was Hoard. He wasn’t allowed to tell Tim what to do.

“Tim?” Dick said. “Woah, buddy, calm down.”

Tim realized he was bristling. Literally. He shook himself to settle the spikes starting to sprout from his back and stopped growling, but that didn’t calm him down.

Months. That’s how long he’d been humoring the Waynes, listening to them, playing nice, letting them pretend they were in charge, and this was the thanks he got? Obviously, the imaginary power had gotten to their heads. They may have had custody, but that gave them no right to demand anything from Tim.

“I’m *done* listening to this,” he said through gritted teeth, then abruptly turned away from the Waynes and walked toward the lockers.

Dick and Bruce exchanged tired glances, but their expressions quickly turned alarmed when Tim grabbed his grapple gun.

“Tim put that down,” Dick said.

Tim ignored him. He already had Chad the gym-bro following him during the day, he refused to deal with human overprotectiveness at night as well.

Bruce narrowed his eyes. “Tim, don’t you dare —”

But Tim did dare. He dared like no other.

"Bite me, Batman!" He snapped, dashed out of the Batcave, and unfurled his wings, pointedly ignoring their panicked shouts as he left his hoard behind.

Janet had been right, humoring them was a good strategy, but only to a certain point. Tim needed to take a leaf out of Dick's self-help books and draw up some boundaries. Until Bruce and Dick got their heads out of the sand, Tim would do what he did best. Fly solo.

***

Nobody was happy with Tim. Apparently, his nightly jaunts were "dangerous" and "heart-attack inducing," but that was their fault. Tim wasn't a child, he could take care of himself just fine. If the Waynes couldn't handle that it was their problem. Tim was done humoring them. It had gone far enough.

The Waynes were doing everything in their power to stop him from sneaking out —ranging from locking him out of the Batcave to setting rogue-level security to trap him in the Manor — but all that did was slow him down. Tim was taking stealth lessons from Cass, and having her occasionally help him was an added advantage they didn't need to know about. The manor's security didn't stand a chance.

Still, just because he could get *out* of the manor didn't mean he was scott-free once he hit the streets.

"For the last time, you're not eating wall blood!" Dick snapped about a week into Tim sneaking out of the manor to lick Crime Alley's walls.

"This is food shaming! I'm being shamed!" Tim howled. Hood was leaving Robin Shrines everywhere; it was his duty to sample them!

Dick made an inarticulate noise of frustration, then threatened to get the spray bottle out again. Tim hissed loudly and tried to break free of his octopus grip.

“You don’t know where these have been, if there are poisons in it or not, or whether Hood is still in the area. You need to go home!” Dick continued.

Dick was lucky Tim wasn’t annoyed enough to transform and fly away. Even he’d have trouble subduing Tim in dragon form. It was tempting though.

“You’re not the boss of me. I am beyond authority!”

“For crying out — If we let you fight crime in healthy ways, will you stop this teenage rebellion?” Dick asked.

Tim stopped squirming to squint at Dick. Was this negotiation? That was faster than expected.

Dick looked exhausted. Bags under his eyes, hair less flowy than usual, a couple of blood stains on his uniform. If Tim didn’t know most of Dick’s stress was from fretting like a mother hen over nonsensical safety concerns, he’d be worried.

“You’re giving us heart attacks whenever you leave the manor,” Dick said. “Bruce and I can’t investigate Hood if we’re spending half the night chasing you down. We can’t keep doing this, Robin.”

“Have you considered not being worried, then?” he sniped.

Dick inhaled slowly, starting meditation breaths. “If I could, don’t you think I would?”

Carefully, he set Tim down on the roof, but left a hand on his shoulder. Tim wiped a smear of blood off his cheek and crossed his arms.

“I know this is difficult for you, but we’re only human, we can’t help but worry,” Dick continued. “I know you don’t get it, but for humans, family is the same as Hoard is for dragons.”

“No, it’s not,” Tim frowned. “I’ve seen TV. Some families hate each other. I could never hate anything in my hoard.”

It was factually impossible. Tim got annoyed and irritated at them sometimes, sure, but he fundamentally loved them. If that changed, they wouldn’t be Hoard anymore.

“It’s close enough,” Dick said. “Just . . . Ok, you’d be upset if I was hurt, right?”

Tim nodded slowly.

“And if I kept doing things that put me in danger, you’d be more upset, right?”

Well, that depended. Tim would probably think Dick was an idiot.

“Wait, do you think I’m stupid?” he asked.

Dick gave him a longsuffering, deadpan expression that answered *that* question instantly. “I think you sometimes forget that love goes both ways, Tim. If you get hurt, it upsets us, just like you freak out whenever one of us is badly injured on the field.”

Tim sat on the edge of the roof. The wind blew his cape off his shoulders, carrying the faint scent of fall. Nights were cooler now, and Tim knew frost would creep onto fixtures soon.

“I don’t freak out,” he grumbled.

“You almost bit a man’s arm off for pointing a gun at me.”

"That was valid."

Way more valid than locking Tim out of the Batcave.

“Look, I know you pretend to dislike affection, feelings, or anything remotely emotional, but that’s how B and I roll. We’ll never be able to shut those things off,” Dick said. He sat next to Tim. “I admit we both tend to go overboard — especially B — but it’s coming from a good place. Having you run off on your own like this? It’s been hard. Really, *really* hard.”

He squeezed Tim’s shoulders and looked into the distance. Tim quickly averted his eyes, feeling suddenly guilty. Even with the white-out lenses, Dick was oozing emotion through his sorrowful gaze.

Tim hadn’t been the only Robin to fly solo.

“You can’t lock me up like Princess Peach,” he said, ignoring how his heart ached thinking about Jason. (*Gone* with nothing he could do about it.) “I don’t need protection. I survived on my own for years and didn’t die, I’m *fine.* Besides, I get stir-crazy super fast.”

He’d had enough of that growing up in Drake Manor, thank you, and that had been with the ability to leave whenever he wanted.

“How about we compromise then? We create some healthy, mutually agreed upon rules so everyone wins.”

That sounded too good to be true. “Depends on how you define healthy.”

“You stick with me and B on patrol and stay away from the Red Hood,” Dick said. “Also, follow all the normal rules. No murder, maiming, or cannibalism. If we engage with Hood, you leave immediately, okay? We’ll handle him.”

Only humans would be dumb enough to tell a dragon not to fight something right in front of them. That was more suicidal than dressing in spandex to knock out clowncore gun-toters.

“This seems suspiciously like you’re trying to protect me,” Tim said. “I’m *not helpless.* ”

And he could totally take Hood.

“Eye-sight of us at all times or we call in Jack, that’s my final offer.”

Tim’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

Calling in Jack meant calling in Janet, which meant Tim and her fighting, which meant at least one trip to the hospital, which meant compromising the entire “keep Tim in one piece” agenda the Waynes were hyper-fixated on. They wouldn’t have the nerve to risk him getting another scar.

Dick ended their side hug and crossed his arms, straightening his spine to give himself a couple of extra inches. The whites of his mask narrowed to slits as well. “Wouldn’t I?”

Tim suddenly remembered that this was the guy who’d decided to track down his parent’s murderer and become a superhero before he was ten years old.

Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to test the limits of his sanity, since he clearly didn’t have any.

“Fine, but you’re lucky I love you,” Tim said.

“And you’re lucky you’re not grounded again,” Dick replied. “B was this close to locking you in a containment cell for safekeeping like some kind of limited-edition Beanie Baby.”

“What.”

“Yeah, count your blessings, kiddo. You think I’m smothering? You have *no idea* how bad he gets.”

“Is that why you’ve been the one dragging me back to the manor all week?”

Tim had thought Bruce was just too busy with the Hood case to fetch Tim.

Dick gave him a wry look. “Yup. Do you really think I was letting Batman within a mile radius of anything involving emotions?”

Yeah, fair point.

***

When Gordon saw Tim on patrol that weekend, he nearly had an aneurysm. It was like watching a frog choke on a mosquito. Tim made a mental note to screenshot that part of his cam footage later for his digital scrapbook. Babs would probably like a copy as well.

“You are aware that he’s got a serial killer after him?” the commissioner said. “A very *active* one?”

“Trust me, it’s better if we can keep an eye on him,” Batman said tiredly. “Our resources are spread too thin otherwise.”

That was a lame way to say “We cannot contain a teenager determined to be awesome and capable in the face of danger.” But speaking of food . . .

“Are there any more presents he left me?” Tim chirped. He'd found a couple of shrines during his solo runs, but there weren't nearly enough for his taste, and Hood had switched spray paint brands. The Joker green flavor wasn’t nearly as good as the gold one.

Gordon went from purple to green in less than three seconds. “God no, kid, and I wouldn’t tell you even if there were.”

Well, goodbye pleasant Tim, hello hangry Tim. Gordon was now on Tim’s blacklist. See if he shared any wings with him again.

“If you weren’t such a killjoy, maybe we’d actually follow the law instead of doing our own thing,” Tim grumbled. “Are you sure you and Babs are related? She’s actually cool, unlike you.”

The mustache twitched. Looks like Dick and Babs had already started their gaslighting scheme, given how irritated he looked. Tim would have to see what they were actually up to. They'd been hush-hush about it, and Tim didn't like being on the other side of a well-kept secret.

Tim resented being kept in the dark, especially since Bruce was keeping him within arm's length at all times. He couldn't patrol with Cass under these harsh conditions. She and Steph were hogging all the waffles, and he was being edged out of their dastardly plan. Not that it *was* a plan. It only had one step . . . but the point stood!

"Since when do you talk with my daughter?" Gordon asked.

Oh. Oops.

"Since I met Joe," Tim replied quickly.

Gordon blinked. "Who's Joe?"

"Joe mama!"

Gordon, Bruce, and a passing alley cat all made pained faces. Dick was right, inflicting horrible puns on people *was* cathartic.

The adults visibly made a conscious decision not to comment on the joke, probably sensing that Tim would respond with an even worse one. Luckily, that also ended Gordon's questions about how Tim knew Barbara since they'd never met outside of Bat-work.

"There've been no new sightings of Hood the last two days," Gordon said. "We'll keep you updated, but it seems like he's laying low."

"Or planning something," Batman growled, looking distrustfully at Gotham's looming buildings. They hid so many secrets even the locals couldn't relax around them.

“Or maybe he’s just catching more robins,” Tim suggested. “They’re really hard to grab out of the air. It takes a lot of time to get that many.”

This comment was ignored as well.

***

Sticking by Bruce worked well, but on the nights when he maniacally chased Hood through the streets, Tim was babysat by Nightwing. Half the time that meant being dragged back to the manor for a movie night, but today he’d convinced Dick to take him out for ice cream instead.

“Don’t you need to go back to Bludhaven sometime?” Tim said. “There’s supposed to be tons of crime there.”

Unless the criminals were slacking off. They were a step down from Gotham criminals, after all.

Nightwing handed Tim a cone, then licked his own bubblegum flavor. “I’m having Kid Flash look after the city for a bit. Some of the other Titans will take a turn too. It’s a good place to train heroes not to take stupid risks.”

“Since they’ll get shot to a million pieces by the gangs if they show off too much?”

“Yup, exactly.”

Tim hummed. He had a new respect for Dick. Nightwing was the biggest showoff in the hero community, but he knew how to do it safely. Hence why he could do quadruple somersaults in Bludhaven and come out unscathed even with six Uzis trained on him.

“We should do some train surfing while you’re here,” Tim said. “You and Bruce are getting too wrapped up in this case, I never see you during the day anymore.”

It gave Tim plenty of time to upgrade his Arkham virus, but he felt like he only saw Bruce and Dick in the Batcave these days. That probably wasn’t healthy. Humans needed lots of stimuli.

Dick smiled and patted Tim's head. "You know, I think I'd be down for that. It's been too long since we did parkour together. A nice, relaxing night playing train chicken would help us take our mind off —"

Dick's eyes widened, then he was shoving Tim to the ground. Their ice creams went splat on the rooftop, much like Tim's head as it banged into the concrete.

He blinked stars out of his eyes, worried he'd scrambled something important given how much his ears were ringing.

Turned out that was just ear damage from the gunshot that had whizzed past his head.

The last thing he saw before Dick shoved them both inside the building and called B for backup was the glint of a sniper rifle several hundred feet away, paired with the familiar red of a certain rogue's helmet.

"Oh, you've *got* to be kidding me," Tim growled.

Birthday Cake was his favorite flavor. Now this was *personal.*

***

One dramatic chase later, followed by rendezvous in the Batcave and the Waynes were coming to the same realization as Tim. Namely, that Red Hood was the one who tried to snipe Dick at the gala, and was now literally gunning for Tim as well. So, not only did he have their civilian IDs, but he was also the villain responsible for making Bruce hire Chad the gym bro.

Tim could forgive the multiple assassination attempts, but having a walking Axe Bodyspray endorsement clumsily haunt his steps was where Tim drew the line. He took back all the nice things he'd said about the rogue; Hood was a diabolical evildoer who needed to be taught a permanent lesson.

“Is Chad really that bad?” Bart asked when Tim called him that night. It had been forever since they hung out in person. Molting, snipers, and serial killers did that. But Tim was keeping him updated on the Gotham situation. “I thought a bodyguard would be fun!”

“It’s not,” Tim scowled. “He’s like if a capybara and a lemming had a baby and dunked it in testosterone and Gatorade. And he smells.”

Tim sneezed more around Chad than he had in the last ten years of his life combined. At this rate, he’d start hoarding tissues out of sheer necessity.

“That’s the worst,” Bart said. “And you’re right, the Bats are being unfair. In the future, *everyone* was trying to kill each other. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Thank you,” Tim said. Bart was an oasis of common sense in a desert of insanity. “I’m not going to stop patrolling just because *another* rogue wants me dead. He has to get in line.”

“Yeah!”

Good old Bart, so understanding. Unlike the *Waynes.* If worrying was an Olympic sport, they’d have gold medals.

It didn’t help that Red Hood was taking over the drug trade at an astounding rate, getting loyal gang members to join his cause, and had over forty confirmed kills to his name within a month. The guy had only been in Gotham since September, and he was already on the top of the threat list. It was impressive to say the least, but it sure wasn’t helping their paranoia. If Tim hadn’t proved how willing he was to patrol Gotham on his own, he’d probably be banned from Robining *again.*

Luckily, his humans were finally learning to pick their battles. Training them was finally paying off. Thank goodness, Tim had felt like he was going insane.

Unluckily, they were still smothering mother hens determined to find *any* way possible to keep him off the streets. Day trips, later nights at WE, purposefully disorganizing Tim’s rock collection so he had to spend hours rearranging it . . . There was even a heated discussion in the kitchen one morning about whether to send Tim away to Titan’s Tower. Tim heard the whole thing on his way down to dinner, eavesdropping by the open doorway.

“He’s not playing, there are *messages written in blood* and people actively shooting at Tim,” Dick hissed. “He’s seeking Robin out on purpose; it’s not safe. We have to get him out of here.”

“Hn,” Bruce said, disgustingly worried.

“I just mean, a few days wouldn’t hurt, right? We almost cornered Hood on Gretchen Street last week. If we ambush him without having to worry about Robin popping up — ”

“It could work,” Bruce murmured.

But then Tim tripped over one of Dick’s shoes and landed in front of the open doorway. Both bats stared at him like deer in headlights. The jig was up.

“Hello, humans,” Tim said. “What’s this I hear about shipping me off like chattel?”

“That’s not — ” Dick began.

“You’re my hoard, I’m not leaving you,” Tim said, staying on his stomach. “You’ll give me abandonment issues.”

“You’re a dragon. You prefer isolation,” Bruce said.

Tim widened his eyes. “Are you assuming things about my species?”

“You told us yourself.”

“Where’s your recording? I want a lawyer.”

Tim liked his personal space, but he *hated* not having access to his hoard. The last time Dick went to space for a Titan's mission Tim had been distraught. The world could have ended and it would not have matched his suffering when he realized he couldn't fly over to Bludhaven and eat cereal with Nightwing on a random rooftop. He'd spent the entire week on the couch, wrapped in Dick's favorite blanket, protesting unfair abandonment.

"Master Timothy," Alfred sighed, stepping over him with a breakfast tray. "They are simply worried about you, and rightly so. I would appreciate it if you stopped attempting to give them heart attacks for the sake of your own amusement."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Okay, fine, but they make it too easy."

"Of that, I am in agreement, but my request is unchanged," Alfred said.

"Harsh, Alfie, harsh," Dick said, and crouched beside Tim. "Would you mind going to the tower, then? I promise it won't be for long. We just want you to be safe while we finish this case."

Tim blinked up at him. "The safest place is with you all, that'll never change."

Wayne Manor had every kind of security system known to man, a literal vigilante cave in the basement, and his hoard. Titan's tower was just farther away . . . although . . .

"But if you really don't want me here, I guess I could go," he mused. "I haven't seen Gar in a while."

He licked his lips. Maybe this time he'd finally catch Beast Boy and see which animal he tasted like the most. This could turn out to be very fun.

The Waynes exchanged a look.

"Okay, so the tower's out," Dick said firmly. "We'll just have to capture Hood faster."

“Agreed,” Bruce said.

Tim rolled to his feet. “Wait, but what about my free snack —I mean, spending time with my peers?”

Bruce gave him a dry look. “Canceled until you actually follow all three of my rules around other heroes.”

Tim pouted as he sat at the breakfast table. Bruce was getting curmudgeonly and had way too many standards. Gar wasn’t even all the way human. It wasn’t cannibalism at all.

Unfortunately, Dick and Bruce didn’t see the sense in this. They just told him to eat his raw steak. Figures the one time he agreed to humor their overprotectiveness they changed their minds. There was simply no pleasing them. Tim decided to complain to Janet about this again later. *She* understood his woes.

Humans, honestly.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone for the last 68k has been excitedly talking about Titans Tower, but I'm cackling maniacally because I never planned to include it in the first place. I have other plans, MWAHAHAHA 😈

_____

Meanwhile, on an international phone call:

Talia: Jason, don't you think this is getting a little out of hand? It was funny at first, but this vendetta against Robin might be distracting you from your mission.
Jason: Hey, the dead birds were completely justified. The symbolism was perfect! Calm down? I don’t need to calm down, I’m perfectly calm —I AM NOT DRAMATIC!
Talia: Jason, for the love of —aaaand he hung up. Wonderful.

In Gotham:

Jason: Dramatic, you want to see dramatic? I'll show you dramatic, Talia, just you wait! Come on Emotional Support Bazooka, it's time to have some fun.

Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss

Chapter Summary

In which Tim does all three.

Chapter Notes

So.

...

Right after I posted the last chapter my apartment flooded. At this point, I feel like disaster is attracted to me. Like, I know I'm a hot mess, but not like this! ... Am I cursed? Is this karma for something? Either way, have mercy! 😭

BTW, Ravengranger wanted to split this chapter in half, but I put my foot down. You're welcome! (Thanks again for betaing Raven, you da bomb!)

Also if any of yall are using Google Docs still, they're starting to implement an AI-interface that gets to look at all your stuff and share it with Google staff members. I've just switched to Libre Office and will be using slash-and-burn tactics on my Google account now. I'M the only one that gets to share my writing with strangers on the internet, thank you. 😤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce and Dick were grateful that Tim was obediently following their silly rules. In fact, Tim was the picture of compliance. Malicious compliance. He stuck like glue to Batman on patrol and didn't eat any of the tasty looking goons, but he was still annoyed with them, so he literally hung off Batman's arm to mess up his aim with batarangs and ate twice as many stray animals.

"I know you're doing this to be annoying, but my bar is so low these days that I'm numb to it," Dick confessed after Tim ate his fifth cat of the week.

Tch, now they were learning *too* fast. There was no perfect balance, was there?

It rankled Tim, but he had to admit there were perks to keeping them happy (even if it was also satisfying to outright ignore them when it was convenient).

Case in point, with the Waynes placated it was way easier to sneak into the Batcave to practice hacking again.

Arkham's security was Barbara level, which meant even God himself would be hard-pressed to hack it. Tim's little Bat laptop was mighty, but not that mighty. He needed Bruce's PC to run the virus, so every spare second of free time was now spent curled up in a blanket by the batcomputer, running its programs ragged to troubleshoot his code.

It was a marathon, not a sprint, and Tim was losing a lot of sleep these days, but it was already paying off. Joker would be dead any day now, he just needed one more breakthrough.

"Down here again?" Dick yawned as he stumbled into the Cave in early October. "I thought Bruce said no helping on comms after 3 AM."

Tim smoothly switched tabs to his favorite Netflix documentary. "This isn't vigilante work. It's enrichment so I grow up properly."

Dick glanced at the screen just as a Nile crocodile bit a wilder beast's head off. Blood squirted everywhere, turning the river onscreen Kool-aid red.

"...Have fun with that," he said wearily, then trudged upstairs.

Hoard member successfully diverted, all according to plan. Tim hadn't even needed to pull out the Saw movies. Dick must have been really tired.

Oh well, a win was a win.

Tim swiveled back to the monitor and typed in a few more lines of code, refocusing on his project as the soothing voice of David Attenborough described crocodilian stomach acid.

He was so close, he could feel it.

***

When he wasn't coding to the melodic tones of violent nature documentaries, Tim's life carried on as normal... aside from Chad, but Tim was ignoring Chad. Chad was *persona non grata* and only existed if Tim acknowledged him, which he *wasn't* so he *didn't.* He went to school, spent afternoons with Bruce at WE, called his parents to vent about human stupidity, and kept in touch with Bart and Young Justice. His pride meant he wasn't leaving Gotham until Hood was caught and the Waynes got their heads out of the sand, so he was missing a lot of cool missions with the team, but he made up for that by spamming the chat with memes and fun facts about serial killers to let them know he was with them in spirit.

It was a good thing he did too, given how many new chats they formed. Either they kept getting hacked or making group chats for everything was a new fad. They were lucky he was so good with computers, because they kept forgetting to add him and Bart to the important ones. Silly humans, inventing technology and not using it properly. You'd never catch a dragon doing that.

"Can I come help catch Hood?" Impulse asked on one of their phone calls. "I could grab his gun and dismantle it in less than a second. It'd be awesome, and then we could hang out again!"

"Yeah, that'd be totes cools," Tim said. "But this isn't about Hood. It's about proving a point to Batman. If I let him have his way now it'll set a precedent."

Humoring them so much during the summer had been a mistake. Boundaries were meant to be tested. Yes, Tim was back to following Bruce on patrol like a demented duckling, but that didn't mean he was going to listen to him when he got stupid(er) about Tim's safety. Robin wasn't supposed to be protected; people were supposed to be protected *from* Robin. No way was he going to let his humans define his threat level. Hmph.

The last thing Tim wanted was Bruce thinking he could set a boundary that Tim wouldn't cross. He'd made that mistake by humoring the Waynes over the summer and he knew better to repeat it. The exact thing had happened to Janet; one moment she was contentedly slaughtering a rival dragon in Guangxi to protect the strange human she'd found, and the next she was agreeing to raise an entire baby dragon with Jack for the next eighteen years. It was a slippery slope. Tim refused to go down it.

“But it’s been forever since you hung out with us. We all miss you!” Bart said. “You didn’t even get to fight Nazi dinosaurs with us last week. You love fighting dinosaurs!”

“I’ve never fought a dinosaur,” Tim corrected. The only one he had ever seen was the fake animatronic in the cave, which he hated with every fiber of his being. It mocked him, looking like a devolved dragon. Someday he was going to crash into it, he just needed to lull the Waynes into the false security of seeing him next to it first so that they’d never suspect it was intentional.

“That’s why you need to hang out with us more. I’m sure we’ll fight more of them!” Bart said, making an excellent point.

Tim shook his head. No, he couldn’t allow himself to be tempted. He had to stay strong.

“I’ll hang out with you as soon as I can,” Tim said. “But I have some stuff to finish here first. You’ll have to take care of the team for me until then and make sure they make good decisions.”

Bart sighed. “Fine.”

“Sorry, I know it’s a lot to ask.”

Anita had a lot of common sense, but the rest of Young Justice were a vacuum of insanity. Granted, that’s why Tim liked them, but they were probably getting into lots of trouble without him there to keep them in line. Bart would have to use his own silliness to fight fire with fire. It was their only hope not to do get caught on live TV doing something crazy like blow up Mt. Rushmore.

“I’ll survive,” Bart said. “I don’t know *how,* but I will. Speedster promise!

Which meant nothing after five minutes, because Bart would forget he made it, but that was irrelevant.

“You’re the best, Bart,” Tim grinned so wide he showed off all his teeth, then ended the Zoom call.

***

Tim's Arkham program was almost done. He'd finally figured out how to get the cameras not to register anyone other than Arkham employees, and he'd cracked the locks over a week ago. If he wanted, he could activate both right now and use the guard routes he'd memorized to avoid detection. One dead Joker, lickety-split.

Sadly, he still hadn't figured out how to stop Oracle's program from flagging the hack, calling the Bats and police to Arkham, and wiping his PC to kingdom come. Tim would only have five minutes to speedrun Arkham and kill the Joker before being caught, but that wasn't *nearly* enough time for what he had planned. He needed an epiphany to get around her code, or his vengeance wouldn't be bloody enough at all.

Unfortunately, epiphanies didn't come easily. All Tim was getting was an exercise in frustration. Barbara was an incredibly gifted hacker, but the fact she used her powers to unknowingly stymie his vengeance was galling. If anyone else had set up Arkham's security the Joker would be long dead, but *of course* the best computer nerd in the world was gatekeeping him from murder. Nothing in Tim's life was easy.

It was likely that if he asked nicely, Bruce or Dick would show him a backdoor on the Bat computer, but Tim didn't want to risk it. They were both very firm about the no-killing rule, especially since Jack stressed how enthusiastic Tim and Janet were about murder. Complete killjoys, the lot of them. Plus there was that whole conversation he'd had with Bruce about not killing people. Bruce wouldn't care if Tim pointed out that Joker didn't count as human, just living breathing trash that needed to be incinerated. Stupid moral code, why couldn't it be as flexible as Dick's spine?

Tim sighed, Janet's reminders to humor his humans over minor things like murder echoing in his head. Even though the Waynes were learning that Tim was unstoppable when he wanted to be, they'd get all mopey if he slaughtered people and those kinds of emotions were Tim's kryptonite. They had to be avoided at all costs, on pain of Tim's sanity, hence the secrecy.

Besides, if they caught Tim poking his nose into Arkham Asylum and the Joker went missing right afterward, they'd think Tim ate him or something. Tim didn't want that kind of suspicion, the lectures would never stop. (He wouldn't eat the Joker anyway, he'd probably get food poisoning.) Plus, there was no way he was letting any part of his hoard near that monster again, not after Jason.

Tim seethed, remembering the short news article about Jason Todd's death in Ethiopia. Joker only got a full body cast, a padded cell, and a temporary flat-line via Nightwing, which wasn't nearly enough to make up for killing Robin II. *Nothing* was. Luckily, Tim wasn't getting even. He was adding compound interest in *spades.*

To that end, he only had one chance to get Joker without the Bats butting in, so he had to be careful. One wrong move and they'd revive him again and make it even harder for Tim to deliver justice.

He had to play the long game, slowly building the skills necessary to not only hack Barbara's safeguards, but bypass any and all physical security in the asylum as well.

So, while Red Hood was decapitating drug dealers and stealing illegal weaponry from Black Mask, Tim was undergoing an anime-worthy training regime to prep him for vengeance.

Dick and Bruce were happy to work on his fighting skills every day. They were so paranoid about his safety that they didn't think twice about making it easier for Tim to hurt people, although they insisted he was only supposed to use those techniques for self-defense. Uh-huh, riiight.

Alfred answered all of Tim's questions about the human body, pleasantly remarking it was good for Tim to take an interest in medicine. Tim did *not* have an interest in it, but he now had pages of diagrams on the best way to rip out a man's organs while still alive, so he didn't bother correcting Alfred. It was a win-win.

Barbara piled on extra coding lessons, not even caring that Tim was doing them at school instead of listening to the teacher's lectures. She was too focused on how Hood was evading all her cameras in Crime Alley, which made it easier for Tim to cannibalize her code into his own program and see how they melded.

Cass taught him how to be sneakier in exchange for dragon rides over Gotham. She loved flying so much, it was so wholesome. Tim almost forgot about revenge whenever she giggled, and catching her when she jumped off his back to free-fall was their favorite game ever. Tim had to be careful not to get too emotional around her, otherwise his heart would probably explode from too much love, and how would he avenge Jason then?

Tim aced her final stealth exam by stealing a cookie off Alfred's tray before dinner without being caught. Both Tim and Cass were still over the moon about that. (It was a *hard* test. More difficult than leaving the manor for solo patrol, even).

Steph, meanwhile, was in charge of refining Tim's lockpicking skills. That was a lot of fun, especially since when she got impatient and just smashed padlocks with hand tools. Efficiency at its finest. Tim quietly slipped a spare hammer onto his belt when she wasn't looking. It'd be great for bashing into Joker's teeth.

She also spent lots of time giving him tips on how to bat his eyes and bite his lip in distracting ways, which she said was a necessary skill, but Tim was dubious about that.

"You have Bambi eyes, you *need* to use them," she said solemnly. "it's your divine right."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Tim wondered. "You're like, the third person."

Were his Bambi eyes seriously that effective? Tim thought Bruce was just stupidly weak to them.

"Then listen to my wisdom, Tim! You may be a freaky weirdo, but you've got the face of a K-pop idol. I guarantee you'll be able to get away with anything if you look cute enough."

"I'm Chinese, so actually it'd be C-pop."

"Right, sorry," she blew hair out of her face. "But the point is that you have an asset. You gotta use it or lose it!"

That ... was logical, he guessed. Bruce did say it was important to hone all of one's skills. Tim could get away with most things already just fine, but Dick and Babs were immune to cuteness. Maybe leveling up his innocent looks was a good idea if meant he could finally bend them to his will.

Still, it was easier said than done. After a solid week of staring into mirrors, Tim admitted he still had no idea what he was doing. Steph declared he was even worse than before and they had to go back to basics. This ended in them watching Bambi together since Tim hadn't seen it in years and he needed to "observe the master at work." Tim didn't see how Bambi was a master of anything though. The fact that a predator hadn't murdered him as a baby was a major plot hole. Tim fell

asleep when the mom got shot, then started cheering for the forest fire near the end because it was more interesting than the deer.

Steph refused to talk to him for three days because of that. Something about him not having a heart. Tim added her to the list of humans he had to digitally stalk for now, but made a mental note to track her down in a week or eight to make sure she wasn't still mad. Humans needed regular interactions with their buddies or they got sad. Just like rabbits, only people were much tastier.

“I’m all alone now, Cass,” he bemoaned. “My humans have forsaken me!”

“Did this to yourself,” she said, playing with an etch-a-sketch. “Karma.”

Tim groaned. “That’s not fair. I’m doing my best.”

Dick and Bruce were busy with Hood, Young Justice were out of reach until his vigil over Gotham ended, and now Steph was giving him the cold shoulder. Only Cass remained and she was currently obsessed with petting every cat in Gotham and had no time for his drama.

“Silly brother. You’ll be fine, just need more cuddles.”

Tim harrumphed and curled closer to her. Of course he’d be fine. He was always fine! The cuddles were unnecessary. He didn’t need physical contact like humans. He loved long-distance friendships, excelled at them even!

Sure it was… weird… not seeing his humans, and he got panicked when he didn't know where they were, and he hated the idea of them being far away from his nest, but that was just because they were delicate little smols. Who knew what danger they’d throw themselves into if he wasn’t there to protect them?

Cass ignored all these good points and flopped onto him like a sock monkey, pulling him into a warm hug.

“Hush baby scaly, no more lonely.”

“Cass, I’m barely younger than you!”

“Big words from tiny lizard.”

“Cass!”

He tried to wriggle free, but Cass knew where all his pressure points were. One nerve strike later and he was boneless in her grip, the victim of the world’s greatest fighter.

“You’re the worst,” he grumbled.

“Today opposite day,” she said smugly. “So am actual best.”

Tim grumbled again, because she was right.

***

The epiphany came three days later.

Tim almost couldn’t believe it. He stood in front of the Batcomputer, swivel chair toppled behind him from standing too fast. The usual noise of bats and electricity was drowned out by his heartbeat, and on the screen, code piggybacking off the Bat computer’s servers to get through the worst firewalls, were the two words Tim had been slaving over for the past two years glowing Joker green.

[ACCESS GRANTED]

He carefully double-checked his code, convinced this was another sleep hallucination. He’d had too many false hopes for this to be the real thing.

Except it was.

He'd cannibalized Barbara's algorithms to feed his code into her network as an update on the Arkham program, and it had accepted the changes. It'd *let Tim into her system.*

His fingers shook on the keys as he ran a quick test, making sure the camera wipes covered the targeted hallways and wiped any and all non-guards from the system, as well as unlocked a few specific doors.

All clear.

He swallowed and paused the code before it could finish its circuit and delete itself from the code, removing all signs that it had been there and using Oracle's own system to crash anything that tried to trace it. Once it was gone, nobody would be able to scrub enough of its code off Arkham's digital walls to cobble it back together.

It worked. *Perfectly.*

Tim forced himself to take a deep breath, dizzy with adrenaline as two years of suffering finally paid off. If he didn't breathe he'd either laugh or cry, but Tim hadn't earned either of those reactions yet.

He'd save those for after the Joker was dead.

Two minutes later he had a remote activation code set up on his wrist computer, the Batcomputer locked down, and the security footage in the cave altered like usual. If Bruce checked the feed, he'd see Tim watching the same documentary he always did and wouldn't suspect a thing.

Nobody would, and that was the beauty of it. Joker would die, the endless ache in Tim's heart would be soothed, and the Waynes would keep their mental health. A happy ending all around. All Tim needed was a big enough distraction to keep the Bats away from Arkham while Tim was occupied, otherwise they ran the risk of spoiling his fun.

Tim's eyes flickered toward the scattered case files haphazardly sprawled across a table in the corner; CSI photos, sightings, and witness testimonies of a certain rogue in Crime Alley picking fights with every drug lord in town.

Bruce said Red Hood had an endgame. A goal. Tim bet whatever it was would be spectacularly bloody and very, *very* distracting. All Tim had to do was wait for him to make his move.

He giggled in anticipation and tapped his fingers against the hammer he'd stolen from Steph, lips curled into a smile that would make his mother proud.

***

He didn't have to wait long. Red Hood was many things, but a slacker wasn't one of them. One didn't become the poster boy for drug empire start-ups without a strong work ethic, after all. He enacted the magnum opus of whatever scheme he was planning on Halloween, and Tim was right, it was distracting. And also very explosive.

Tim stared up at the burning skyscraper in awe, ears still ringing from the blast. Fire climbed the walls as debris fell to the street below, smoke billowing into the smog-covered sky like a Gothic version of an atomic bomb.

Oracle said it was a bazooka over the comms, modified to pack an extra punch. Tim desperately wanted one of his own now. Why did villains get to have all the cool weapons?

Another slab of concrete slammed into the street below. Tim would feel worse about that if the building wasn't owned by Black Mask.

And, well, if it wasn't clear already who was responsible for this level of destruction, that sealed the deal. There was only one person giving Black Mask this level of trouble, and explosives were definitely in his wheelhouse.

"Robin, you're benched, go home," Batman snapped.

“But —” Tim said.

“No buts!” Nightwing said, grappling down from a neighboring roof next to Tim. “Just please stay away from the Financial district tonight, okay Tim? I’ll buy you as much seafood as you want if you do.”

“I can help!”

Tim surged forward only to be grabbed by the shoulders and hauled away from the edge of the roof by Bruce. It was drizzling and rain was making their masks blurry, but even without getting a good look at his face, the growl was unmistakably protective. “You promised to stay away from this case. We have it handled. Go report to Agent A.”

Tim wanted to argue, but Babs was swearing into the comm as more information about the explosion was fired through police scanners. Sightings of Red Hood were pouring in, the number of injured people was rising and emergency vehicles were needed yesterday.

"Fine!" Tim hissed. "But I'm going to remember this. See how you like it when I ice *you* out of a case."

Dick didn’t even try to hide his relief. “Great, perfect. We’ll see you at home, Robin. Make sure you go straight there, no detours.”

He squeezed Tim into a bone-crushing hug, then grappled off the roof toward the explosion, talking urgently into his comm.

“Keep your promise,” Bruce said sternly, then followed suit, cape swirling dramatically as he vanished into the shadows.

Tim gave them both the bird and waited for them to vanish completely before vaulting off the roof and heading back toward Bristol.

Then he smiled and changed course.

He'd keep his promise alright. The one he made to Jason years ago.

Babs was keeping tabs on the emergency responders, B and Dick were going to wage war on Hood in the shell of a burning building, and Alfred was at home and no doubt prepping the med bay.

Tim couldn't have asked for anything better.

He leapt over half-rotted roofs and folded shop awnings, yanking his comm out and throwing it to the abyss below. It fell into a puddle and fizzled, frying instantly.

He paused near Crime Alley to grab the bag of supplies he'd prepped ahead of time and took care of his pesky trackers too, leaving them near the water tower where Hood's first Robin shrine had been.

There, untraceable. Now for the fun part.

Tim grinned as he spread his wings, letting his human form shift into his true nature. The feeling of skin rippling into scales was unlike anything else, and as he took to the sky he couldn't help but close his eyes and bask in how free it was to exist like this and give into his instincts.

For the next few minutes, there was no human Tim, no charade to put on, or behaviors to watch. Just Tim in his element, the way he was supposed to be.

Gotham's skyline stretched out before him, the smog obscuring him from the streets below better than any cloaking device, and Arkham Asylum loomed on the horizon, practically inviting him inside, and Tim honed in on it with two years of obsessive hate.

He owed Hood one, he couldn't have planned this better himself.

***

Breaking into Arkham wasn't a cakewalk, but Tim had prepared for every outcome. Even though his nerves were fried and his hands shook with adrenaline, outwardly he was as cool as a cucumber, dodging security and saluting a scrubbed camera as he ran past undetected.

He got through the asylum unscathed, hiding from the guards with the ease of years on the streets. Even his bright Robin outfit didn't give him away. *That's* how good at this he was. Those stealth lessons with Cass were really paying off.

This was the perfect night to strike, he'd never get a better chance. According to his estimations, he'd have over an hour with the Joker before anyone checked his cell.

Tim gripped his bag of torture implements tighter. An hour wasn't nearly long enough, but he'd make due. He had a *lot* of options to choose from.

There was a complication once he got to the Joker's cell though. Something that Tim had forgotten to put in his thousands of contingencies. And who could blame him? People weren't supposed to exist in two places at once.

"What the hell, you're not supposed to be here!" Tim said, aghast.

Red Hood stood up…and up…and up (wow, he was tall) from where he'd been picking the lock to Joker's cell, towering over Tim like a behemoth. The eye covers on his helmet glowed an eerie, lurid green.

"Replacement."

Chapter End Notes

😁

Dead Bird Walking

Chapter Summary

A clown, a dragon, and a crime lord walk into an insane asylum.

If there's a punch line, chances are it'll be pretty literal.

Chapter Notes

I stand cackling on a dais, dressed in a fluffy bathrobe as readers chant "JASON JASON JASON" below.

Me: REJOICE, HE HAS BEEN MANIFESTED!

Thank you Ravengranger for being the best beta ever AND for coming up with this chapter's title. It's so dramatic, and we definitely need more of that in this story. 😉

Also, thank you to everyone who has been commenting on this fic! You guys are the best and I love seeing your favorite parts, theories, and keyboard smashing. I would not update nearly as frequently without all of you. Kudos for all of you, you're the champions! ❤️❤️❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A light bulb flickered above them, painting the hallway in deeper shadows. The only light was the eerie green glow from Hood's helmet, and the pale white from Tim's eyes peeking out from behind his mask.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Red Hood growled.

"Hey, I asked first!" Tim said. "Aren't you supposed to be blowing up people downtown?"

The whole point of attacking now was that Hood was Tim's unknowing partner in crime. If he wasn't distracting the bats, then who was?

"That's a distraction, *obviously.* One of my minions borrowed a spare helmet. I can't believe you're supposed to be the smart one. But I'm guessing if you're here, B isn't too far behind. What are you doing, relocating the Joker?" he sneered. "The big bat hear I'm going to blow his brains out and decided that wasn't okay?"

Tim wrinkled his nose. "Wow, egocentric much? The world doesn't revolve around you, big shot."

"Cogito, ergo sum, bitch, the world is mine if I say it is, and so are *you."*

There was the click of a gun's safety going off, then Red Hood was pointing his pistol at Tim's head. Tim snarled, snapping his staff out in response. He did *not* have time for a mid-boss. He sure hoped Hood liked broken collarbones, because mercy was only for when Tim was feeling nice.

"I've been waiting for this moment," Hood said. "All those messages and you still kept running the streets like you owned them. It's time for you to learn that little birds aren't supposed to leave the nest, Robin. That's how wings get broken."

He loomed over Tim, six feet of muscle, anger, and drama. All he needed was a skull and to hold and he'd be a dead-ringer for a Hamlet wannabe kickstarting their monologue career.

Tim was, by nature, curious. As such, even though he was quickly getting angry, he had a lot of questions about why Hood was talking like an old-timey Shakespeare villain. Was it for his Rogue shtick? Because he'd fit right in with the more dramatic loonies if this was part of his brand. Also, how was Hood so good at looming? He was, like, Bruce-level, which should have been impossible. It was making him double-take.

His confusion must have bled through his mask, because Hood growled again. "What, never been threatened? Must be different without the old man sheltering you."

Tim huffed *Threatened?* By *Hood?* This goon was so far down his priority list he wasn't even on the page.

“Batman doesn’t protect me."

He wasn’t *supposed* to, anyway. It was Tim’s job to make sure *he* was safe. Were the joint patrols giving criminals the wrong idea? Tim *knew* he should have negotiated more.

"Enough with the games, Robin. Batman can’t save you now, so spare me your false confidence." Hood said.

"Yeah yeah, whatever, bozo," Tim said, losing the last shred of his patience. If he wanted a dramatic monologue he’d watch TV. "I get it, you have some kind of vendetta against the Bat and you’re taking it out on me. *Big Deal.* We can have our showdown later, *after* I kill the Joker."

The only reason Tim wasn’t chomping first and asking questions never was because Hood could probably get a shot off before Tim killed him. Tim’s scales —while strong, fireproof, and acid-resistant — wouldn’t be able to block a bullet at such close range. Plus, the noise would attract the guards.

Red Hood stumbled out of his combat position. "After you *what?"*

"Kill the Joker," Tim repeated, hitching the bag higher on his shoulder with his free hand. "I've been planning it for years."

"But bats don't kill," Red Hood said.

"Do I look like Batman?" Tim shot back. "Besides, Joker deserves it, and what B doesn't know won't hurt him.”

"Hey, I'm not arguing that," Hood said. "But you're mistaken. *I'm* going to kill him. I was here first, so get in line."

Tim bristled. "Like hell, I worked my butt off for this chance. There's no way I'm letting some wannabe paint bucket cosplayer steal my revenge. Get your own psycho clown to murder, I've got dibs!"

"Oh yeah? The Joker *murdered* me, think you could top that?”

Somewhere in Tim’s brain the phrase “murdered me” didn’t make sense, but he had other, bigger fish to fry than a two-bit rogue’s beef with Gotham’s demented version of Popov.

"He killed someone I love," Tim snapped, "and pain isn't comparable, jerkface, all the self-help books say so and I've read *plenty*. Besides, I've been planning this longer, *and* I hacked the security system, so I've got rank."

Hood shouldn’t even had been able to get in. Arkham’s alarm should have gone off the moment he set foot on the property . . . oh, except that Tim had set it to erase all non-employees from the system. Oops. That worked way better than he’d expected.

"No, you've got a dead boy’s uniform and an ego the size of the Goodyear blimp," Hood's finger twitched closer to the trigger. "How would B react if he knew you were sullying the Robin mantle like this? Granted, the last kid already did, but still —"

"Don't you dare talk about Robin II like that," Tim almost shouted. He stepped up to Hood’s chest and glared into the white-out eyes of his helmet. "He was the purest, nicest, most amazing person in the world, and the Joker ripped him apart. He'd be *happy* I'm getting revenge for him."

Red Hood took another step back, nearly stumbling. It was hard to tell what his expression was with the helmet, but Tim thought he looked shaken.

"Wait, you're avenging . . ." he stuttered.

"Robin, yes," Tim said, squeezing his bag's strap. "I never got to officially meet him, but he was my hero, and I followed him everywhere before he died. He didn't deserve being killed like that, and if B and Nightwing won't perma-kill Joker, then *I* will. And I'm going to make it hurt."

He opened the flap on his bag showing Hood the top layer of pliers, thumb screws, and other torture devices he'd brought. Steph's hammer sat innocently on top, near a hacksaw and two vials of lemon juice.

Hood released a shaky breath. "Damn, that's some serious equipment."

"I'm not playing around," Tim said. "You try and stop me, and I'll use them on *you."*

That was a lie. He'd left his comm in a gutter somewhere in Crime Alley so he couldn't keep tabs on the bats, but the clock was ticking and Tim was getting impatient. He wouldn't torture Hood, just incapacitate him. Permanently.

Red Hood holstered his gun and held up his hands, suddenly much less tense. "Woah, alright. How about this then. You've impressed me with your speech, so how about we team up on this one? I figure we can collaborate, given the . . . creative . . . approach you're taking."

Tim glowered suspiciously at the man. "Seriously?"

Hood shrugged. "Well, it wasn't my original plan to kill the clown in Arkham, but yeah. Black Mask was being a bitch about cooperating anyway. Hard to pull off a master plan when one of your rooks is acting like a pawn."

That was a good point, but Tim shifted his weight unhappily. He didn't want to share. Joker was *his* . . . but then again . . .

His eyes flickered to Hood's guns and the many, many knives strapped to his body. Humans could be surprisingly creative when it came to violence, and Red Hood had a resume of brutal murder behind him. He probably had a lot of good torture tips.

"Fine," Tim said, "but you have to promise not to chicken out. No mercy, or I'll off *you* next."

Nobody got in the way of Tim's revenge on pain of death.

He stuck his hand out. Red Hood clasped it in a solid handshake. The man smelled so strongly of gunpowder and cigarettes that it blocked out all other scents.

“Deal.”

Hood abruptly let go and turned back to the door. Tim’s amazing virus program had disabled the electronic security, but there were about twelve mechanical locks and deadbolts as well. It only took a few minutes before Hood had them off, using lockpicking skills that Tim was unfairly jealous of. (He hadn’t even gotten to use Steph’s hammer.)

Finally, the last lock fell. He and Hood stood in front of the door, paused for a single moment. The air crackled with tension. Hood’s fingers inched towards his weapons. Tim curled his hands into fists to stop them from morphing into claws. He couldn’t make tonight’s fun end too quickly, after all.

“You know what, Rob? I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship,” Red Hood said, and pushed open the door.

Tim’s stomach flipped. He could barely breathe. An anger bigger than any other emotion he’d ever felt flooded his veins, but despite that, Tim couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

The door clicked shut behind him and did not reopen for a long, long time.

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Turns out, graphically murdering a deranged lunatic together was a great bonding activity. Sure, an hour wasn't a long time, but Tim walked out of that cell feeling like he knew Red Hood on a deeply personal level.

And Jack thought he couldn't make friends. Ha!

They dumped the body in Gotham’s harbor, careful to wrap each part in separate bags and use different drop points. Joker's brain and heart they'd thrown into an incinerator. Hood had insisted. Something about "No other zombies" and all that. Weirdo. Oh well, any excuse to desecrate Joker's body was good in Tim's book.

The night ended with both of them sitting on the docks, watching as genetically modified piranhas devoured Joker's liver. As far as invasive species went, they were extremely useful. On the horizon, smoke billowed up from the financial district. The sound of sirens echoed off the buildings and over the water like a wind chime.

Apparently, whatever goon Hood had given his helmet to had decided to go all out and then some. Tim applauded their talent for wanton destruction, they had kept the bats busy far longer than Tim had expected.

"You know, I never expected revenge to feel so wholesome," Hood said. “I feel like a big weight just got lifted off my shoulders.”

“Hn,” Tim said, sort of agreeing. He was happy the Joker was dead, but that didn’t fix the fact that Robin still was.

“What’s up, short stack? Didn’t get enough time dismembering him?” Hood joked, as if that was what was bothering Tim. “All you had to do was say something, and I would have shared.”

“It’s fine, we both got equal time,” he said, wrapping his cape around himself. “I’m just sad still. J — Robin is still gone.”

Anger was great at solving problems like revenge, but it didn’t heal wounds. Now that Jason’s murderer was gone, there was nothing to distract Tim from the hollow ache where his hoard member should have been. Tim would just have to wait for the grief to scar over naturally, though he doubted it ever would.

"Yeah, about that."

Red Hood reached up and removed his helmet. Which was a stupid thing to do, because now Tim knew who he —

Who he —

Knew who he —

"Jason?" Tim whispered.

Jason Todd, years older and *alive*, gave a crooked smile. Not even the new scars, white streak of hair, and added bulk couldn't hide the similarities to Tim's photos; the cock of his head, the dimple of his left cheek, even the chip on his front tooth were the same.

"Hey, Baby Bird, nice to officially meet you," he said. "I heard you were a fan?"

Tim opened his mouth, but all that came out was a small, broken-off sob. Jason's face fell.

"Wow, hey, it's alright, calm down —"

But Tim couldn't. He was feeling Emotions.

Jason had been *dead*. Beaten and burned and buried and Tim hadn't saved him. He'd *lost* him. But now he was back? He was okay? Yes... yes, he was *alive* and *safe* and the Joker could *never* touch him again.

"Hey Robin, seriously, stop crying," Jason said, "I know I said I wanted people to mourn me more but I've changed my mind — Woah!"

Tim flung himself at Jason, wrapped his arms around the man, and clung. His shoulders shuddered as he sobbed harder, curling deeper into his hoard member's chest.

"Jason, Jason Jason Jason —" he whispered.

"Yeah, yeah that's me," Red Hood was hoarse. He hesitantly ran a hand through Tim's hair. "That's me, Robin. I'm here. It's okay."

Tim rapidly shook his head. This wasn't just okay. This was a *miracle.* Amazing. Perfect. It was like a hole inside him was suddenly healed and the world had an extra color added to it (or maybe Tim was just finally seeing the full spectrum again after years of black and white).

"I missed you," he whispered.

I love you, he thought, squeezing harder.

Jason's hair ruffles hesitated, then the vigilante hugged Tim back, startlingly gentle.

"Thanks for remembering me, Tim. I didn't think anybody did," he said quietly.

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Tim cried for an ungodly amount of time. If Janet were there, she would have cringed into an alternate dimension out of embarrassment. Dragons didn't do emotions, and he was usually better about ignoring them, except that this was about Jason, one of his first hoard members. Tim figured that gave him license to cry for the rest of eternity.

Jason ran his hands through Tim's hair over and over, so gently it hurt Tim’s heart. Occasionally he'd mutter something about helpless strays under his breath, sounding inexplicably fond. The words were a lullaby, and Tim slowly relaxed into the man's hold, clinging to his jacket like a koala.

"Hey, you should probably call B," Jason said at one point. "I had my buddy Kevin blow up Black Mask's skyscraper to distract him, but it sounds taken care of now. Bruce’ll want to know you're okay."

If the fire was under control, then Tim needed to book it so Bruce wouldn't connect Joker's murder to a suspiciously absent Robin. Any other scenario and he would have been scrambling to stick to his plan, but right now Tim didn't care.

"Not leaving you," he mumbled into Jason's shoulder. "B can wait."

"Um, no? Your dad is going to freak if you're missing the same night I publicly declared war on Black Mask... again. This is, like, the third time. But that’s not the point! I've been leaving around creepy hints that I'd murder you and leave your body parts around for him to find, so if you’re not home — shit, why did I do that? What was I thinking?"

"You’d never hurt me. And my dad's in Malaysia, he doesn't know about the birds," Tim said sleepily. "I gotta make sure you don't disappear."

When he was more awake, he’d thank Jason properly for all the shrines too. Maybe next time Tim could help catch the birds?

"...Kid, Batman is literally downtown talking to Gordon. I hacked his comm."

"You're so smart!" Tim gushed. "Best Robin ever."

"I'm not Robin anymore," Jason grumbled, but sounded pleased at the praise. "And hey! Don't distract me. Your dad is like two miles away."

Tim squinted up at Jason. "Bruce isn't my dad. He just got custody after Mom tried to kill me again."

He nuzzled back into Jason's shoulder, breathing in its scents. It smelled like blood and gunpowder, but if Tim focused, he could scent the smallest hint of Jason in the fabric. Familiar. Good. His eyelids started to droop.

Jason suddenly hugged him much tighter, voice changing pitch. "Tried to *what?"*

"Don't worry, she won't do it again," Tim yawned, "and now that Bruce has me, my dad doesn't have to keep hiring surgeons to get rid of my scars, so he's happy too. Win-win-win."

“Wait, but — does Bruce know?”

“Uh-huh.”

Tim sagged deeper into Jason’s arms as exhaustion hit him like a tank. The adrenaline from his murder heist was wearing off, and crying for so long wiped him out. All he could really focus on was how safe he felt in Jason's arms.

"For the love of —" Jason was hissing. "Bruce let them fuck off to Malaysia after that? Screw that, he doesn't get to keep you. Come on, I’m taking you home."

Tim protested as he was lifted into Jason's arms, but once they started walking he settled back down, eyes closed and a smile tugging his lips.

As they walked through Gotham's alleys, the shriek of police sirens and fire truckers was undercut by Jason's grumbling. Tim twisted his hand into the soft leather of Red Hood's jacket and fell asleep, deciding it was the best lullaby he'd ever heard.

Chapter End Notes

posts my art feeling cute, might delete later.

fun fact, the proto-title for this chapter was "Arkham's Eleven," but Raven's was so much better. 😁

Meanwhile, in the Batcave:

Bruce: What do you mean Robin never came home?!
Alfred: Pray tell what ELSE I could mean by that, Master Bruce.

Dick: Did we check the cams? Maybe he got distracted by another alley cat--
Babs: Nope, Spoiler just called in. She found his trackers in Crime Alley, as well as a broken comm.
Dick: Crime Alley? But that's---oh no. Oh no no no no, not again. I can't do this again, I can't lose another brother!
Bruce: Breathe Dick, it's going to be okay. We're going to save him. I WON'T be too late again.

Meanwhile, in Crime Alley:

Jason has now acquired a new sibling.

Jason has now unlocked the Wayne Adoption Instinct.

Jason is now speedrunning a midlife parental crisis.

It's been a weird day for Jason.

:)

Tim’s Wonderful, Amazing, Totally Consensual Kidnapping

Chapter Summary

Jason is more like Bruce than he cares to admit.

Chapter Notes

We're getting dangerously near the end of my prewritten stuff guys. o-0

Also, my friend called my haircut "DiCaprio on the Titanic," which I'm choosing to take as a compliment even though I don't think it was.

Thanks for the awesome beta, Raven! You da bomb!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim woke up in a rundown apartment, lured back to consciousness by the smell of bacon. Delicious, savory bacon, a god among food. Tim loved it so much he even liked it cooked. Cold fat just wasn't the same as when it was greasy and pan-fried.

Tim didn’t know how he got to the table. One moment he was curled up on a gross, bloodstained couch, and the next he was finishing his third plate of eggs and glorious meat. Any time between those moments was lost to the ether.

"You eat like you haven't had food in seven years," Jason commented. “Have your parents been starving you?”

Jason! Tim beamed at him, glad last night hadn't been a deranged fantasy. This was too good to be true, but he wasn't complaining.

“You’re real after all!” he gasped. “I thought I was dreaming. Wait, am I dreaming? It doesn’t matter, cuz I’ll stay asleep forever if I am, but it’d be nice to know.”

“We’re not in Inception, so calm down,” Jason said.

Tim did not calm down. Reality confirmation meant his serotonin was peak levels of happy and that it was time for more affection. He jumped out of his seat and wrapped Jason in another hug, clinging to him like Jack to his delusions of family vacations.

“This is the best day ever,” Tim whispered.

Jason patted him on the back, looking unsure if he should be touched or very concerned. It reminded Tim of Bruce, which made his awkwardness even better.

“Uh, t...that’s great, Tim. Glad you’re happy,” he said. “Your eggs are getting cold.”

Jason nudged him back to his seat, looking far more tired than he should. There was a paperback *Dealing With Troubled Youth* on the bar with several bookmarks in it, maybe Jason had had a late night reading? Dick said he'd been a big bookworm, and apparently that book was super riveting. Bruce and Dick had been glued to it all of last year. They must have shared the same book taste.

And speaking of taste . . .

"Did you cook this?" Tim asked, so happy his stomach was cooperating today.

"Yeah, I went shopping yesterday so the fridge was full —"

Tim was eating food made by *Jason Todd*, the only hoard member other than Alfred who could be trusted in the kitchen. Today could not get any better. His happy squeal was totally valid.

"So, listen," Jason said, fiddling with his fork. "About your parents —"

Tim snorted loudly as he licked his plate clean. "Enough about them. They're fine, I love them, blah blah blah. Tell me about where you were! How did you come back? Why are you dressing like a reject Joker? I need the details!"

"Woah, slow down. We should really talk about —"

"Deets, Jason! Gimme the deets!" he slapped his hands against the table and vibrated in excitement.

Jason averted his eyes, muttering about too many sparkles in the air.

"I mean, if you're that curious, but it's pretty boring," Jason hedged.

He then proceeded to tell Tim that he dug himself out of his grave, got hit by a car, adopted by Bruce's ex-girlfriend, dumped in radioactive Kool-Aid, and turned into a powerhouse assassin by a

cult of eco-terrorists with a ninja fetish.

“Like I said, it’s not as cool as it sounds,” Jason said.

Humble and badass. Jason was a strong contender for Favorite Hoard Member.

“You are so awesome,” Tim gushed. “I can’t believe the League didn’t keep you. I would have. Nah, I’m *gonna.”*

Jason was never leaving him ever again. Tim would make sure of it.

“Well, luckily Talia’s grudge match against Bruce is stronger than her loyalty to Ra’s,” Jason shrugged. “She’s a classic case of ‘cut off the nose to spite the face.’ She’s also surprisingly open to adoption, but that’s not important. We need to talk about you.”

Jason leaned forward, looking very serious. It was a good look on him. Very broody. Tim highly approved.

“Right, you were mad about Robin,” Tim nodded. “Don’t worry, if you want it back, I’ll give it to you. Although the uniform might be a bit too small.”

Jason grimaced. “Timbo, I would rather be buried a second time than put those booty shorts back on.”

“Don’t worry, I added pants!”

“*Leggings,* Tim, you added skintight *leggings.”*

Tim blinked. “Is there a difference?”

Jason tapped his fork against his plate, expression the same as Dick's whenever he tried to make Tim do homework. Or Alfred when he'd found Tim's collection of fresh animal bones under his bed. Or Bruce whenever Tim tried to trick him into agreeing to murder. Or Steph when he'd eaten food off the ground in Central Gotham that one time.

Basically, he looked like anyone who had to talk to Tim for more than five minutes. He was going to fit right in with the rest of the hoard.

"Uniform choices aside, I've literally outgrown the role. Besides, I kind of hate Bruce," Jason said. "He's a stuck-up, emotionally constipated lunatic. He needs to go down."

Tim tilted his head, confused. Those were all charm points. What was not to like?

"— I can't believe he didn't kill the Joker. *We* had to do it. What kind of murder victim has to do that kind of heavy lifting? And you're like 10, you shouldn't be breaking into prisons to kill clowns. It's unfair and unethical. Practically child labor."

Tim steepled his fingers. "Those are all valid points, but to be clear, you're just mad about the lack of murder? Cuz I've had a lot of talks with him about that. He and Dick are just too delicate for it."

"It's more than that — what?"

Tim got up and grabbed the skillet off the stove. He dumped the rest of the eggs onto his plate and started shoveling them in. His stomach still hated him at times, but when he could keep food down his appetite was bottomless. It came in handy now (no wasting Jason's food!) but hopefully he wouldn't grow much more. He didn't want to bang his head on any doorways. Bruce could keep his monopoly on that.

"Bruce and Dick are fragile, precious smols," Tim continued. "They can't handle killing people without suffering mental breakdowns. Dick had the Joker flatlined for three minutes, and it almost destroyed him. That's why I didn't invite them to my murder party last night. They have to be protected from this cruel world at all costs."

Vigilantes may have been unstoppable beasts on the field, but emotionally they were toddlers with machine guns, and those guns were almost always pointed at themselves. Batman and Nightwing

were both bleeding hearts, so Tim had to make sure they didn't accidentally hurt their hearts. Emotions were the one thing he couldn't eviscerate. Therefore, the negative ones weren't allowed to exist if he could help it.

"You're telling me that Dickface *killed my murderer* and then *copped out* of finishing the job?"

Tim glanced up from his plate in surprise. He hadn't known it was possible for someone to sound that angry.

Jason had his head in his hands, fingers twisting over his curls so hard Tim was surprised none of his hair got torn out. He had a crazed look in his glowy green eyes.

"First Batman doesn't kill him, then Dick unalives him and *the Joker comes back anyway,* and now he's adopting baby Robins from abusive homes without even punishing the parents? What the hell Bruce. WHAT. THE. HELL."

"My parents aren't abusive," Tim scoffed. "In fact, they're way too lovey-dovey. I could probably sue them for emotional damages from watching them kiss as a child. That's just yuck. Hey, do you have any donuts? I want sugar."

Jason absently shoved a takeout menu at Tim as he continued to have an existential crisis. Tim borrowed his phone and made an order on DoorDash to be delivered to "The Good Humans" while the mass-murdering vigilante spiraled. Comfort food would fix those emotions, and sugar was very comforting.

"Unbelievable. I should have come home sooner. Crap, why did I let Talia convince me to take that ammunition production class? I can *buy* bullets in America. There was no point. Dammit, I could've helped you escape to safety faster, Tim," he moaned.

"Why would I want to escape? And what safety?" Tim asked curiously, but Jason just kept muttering to himself. Something about a book club and fellow nerds? It was hard to make out.

Jason was certainly a fun personality. Very excitable and *super* dramatic. No wonder he was such a flamboyant crime lord. The explosions were probably a metaphor for his feelings.

Tim got up and grabbed the donuts left at the door. Gotham's delivery service was *very* punctual. Whichever rogue threatened to hunt down the employees if they didn't shape up deserved a medal.

He tossed a bismarck onto Jason's plate, but he didn't grab it, too lost in whatever mental labyrinth he'd locked himself in. Hmm, that wasn't good. Tim stuffed an entire crème-filled one in his mouth, deciding to lead by example.

"Dn worffy," he said, swallowing it whole. "I wsf happy."

"Oh yeah? You mentioned scars, Timmy. *Happy people don't get scars surgically removed."*

"Yes, they do," Tim said, "and I'm lucky that's all that had to happen. Mom is still missing a chunk of her arm. You should have seen Dad's face when he realized she was hurt too. Being grounded was so worth it though."

That would forever be Tim's crowning achievement. Getting that much of her bicep ripped off was hard, especially given how young he was at the time. He and Janet were both very proud of that fight, although it had given Jack an entire streak of gray near his temple and ended in several "how to be human" classes on appropriate self-defense that Tim hadn't bothered to retain. Dragons had perfect recollection, but Tim had perfected selective hearing before he could walk.

Jason's face hardened further. "You seriously think that's normal?"

"Well," Tim said slowly. "Not for everyone, but definitely for my family. It took forever to explain that to Bruce and Dick, but they get it now. They're going to be *so* happy to see you."

"I'm not going back to Bruce, and neither are you," Jason said stonily. "I don't care if I have to overturn my death certificate. Murder bros before adoptive hoes."

"Catchy, I like it," Tim said. "You gonna eat that?"

The poor donut was abandoned on Jason's plate. It needed rescuing.

"No, I need to brood. And plot. And scheme. And figure out how to wreck Bruce for being a dick."

Jason shoved the bismarck at Tim and wandered off to clean his guns, so grumpy it was a surprise that there wasn't a literal thundercloud over his head.

Tim ate another six donuts and watched Jason hunch over his impressive collection of weapons, muttering about "bonus revenge" and "accidental parenthood." There were enough guns to be an entire arsenal and more knives than Tim could count, as well as a spot labeled "Emotional Support Bazooka" that was suspiciously empty.

The sound of bullet casings hitting the floor and Jason swearing in five languages as he grumbled made Tim feel fuzzy inside. He still couldn't believe how happy he was. It surpassed every other emotion he'd ever felt. It still felt impossible that Jason was *back.* Miracles like this . . . well, nobody actually *believed* they would happen, not even in a world of magic, mayhem, and superheroes. That's why they were miracles.

Tim ducked his head, smiling so wide it hurt his face. Whatever brought Jason back, he'd never complain. His hoard was whole, and so was Tim. Nothing could be better than this.

Except . . .

Tim absently picked up the final donut in the box. Chocolate with rainbow sprinkles. Dick's favorite.

You know what else were Dick's favorite? Brothers.

He slowly stood up and popped the pastry into his mouth. The sugar went to his brain and filled him with *marvelous* ideas.

"Hey, Tim, get settled. We'll go to Goodwill later and grab you some clothes," Jason said, back still turned as he dismantled a handgun. "You might have to miss some school, but once I get a fake ID

for you, I'll enroll you somewhere less pretentious than Gotham Academy. B will be on our tail for a bit, but once it dies down, life will go back to normal. I'm going to look after you, promise."

Tim hummed absently and opened the window, letting Gotham's familiar scent of lead, fumes, and human suffering waft in.

"—know it's nothing fancy here, but it'll do until I steal more of Black Mask's money —"

He cracked his knuckles and stretched, making sure he was ready to move fast.

"—and no hard feelings, but I'm *super* tempted to kill B over this," Jason finished. "He of all people should know what signs to look for. I can't believe he calls himself a parent."

Tim casually walked to the other side of the room so that Jason was between him and the open window.

"You can try all you want," Tim said pleasantly. "Murder attempts are healthy among family members, and you'll have a *lot* of chances to try."

Something in his tone made Jason turn around slowly, visibly put off.

"Why are you smiling like that?" he asked. "And what do you mean, lots of chances?"

Tim giggled, hiding his sharp teeth behind his hands. "*You're back*, Jason. Actually *back.* It's the best thing ever, I've never been happier! But you know what would be perfect?"

"No," Jason took a small step closer to his guns. Ah, they must have been his comfort items. Tim would have to come back for them, then.

"I'm not a member of Bruce's family," Tim said, because hoard was different. "But I know they'd be a lot happier with you back in it."

“Oh please, I’ve killed dozens of people,” Jason scoffed. “No way would he accept me back into his home — where I *don’t* want to be, by the way. Nobody wants a murderer in their family.”

Pfft, liar liar, pants on fire. Jason belonged with the Waynes. He didn’t get a choice in this.

“Of course they will! Happy families kill people too; it’s a lifestyle," Tim said. “Besides, homicide literally has the word home in it. That’s not a coincidence.”

“First off, that is *not* how it’s spelled —”

But Jason didn’t finish that sentence, because Tim chose that moment to pounce.

Jason swore and reached for his gun, but he was too late. Tim bodyslammed into him like a tiger going in for the kill.

Or, more accurately, like a dragon attempting a hug.

If Tim had been a normal 130 lb human barely pushing 5’4”, he probably would have crumpled against Jason’s chest like a butterfly against a windshield. Luckily, Tim was a juvenile dragon who had just gone through a growth spurt from hell, so knocking the Red Hood off his feet and straight out the window was a cinch.

Tim made sure to hug Jason tightly as he transformed, letting scales sprout and muscles lengthen until there was no human Tim left at all. Then he took to the sky, darting into the low-hanging clouds with a speed that would make non-Yinlongs jealous. He and Janet were the fastest type of dragons out there, and as Tim darted toward Wayne Manor, he was never more grateful for that fact.

After all, faster flying meant the sooner his hoard would be reunited, and wouldn’t that be a wonderful moment for the family scrapbook?

Jason wriggled in his arms, screaming and cussing a storm.

“— the HELL are you!? Put me down! Ugh, useless reptile!”

Tim happily ignored his human. He was very good at that.

***

It was funny, Tim totally hadn’t noticed time passing when he was with Jason. They’d had breakfast food, so he’d assumed it was breakfast time, but obviously he’d forgotten to factor in their late night on the town. Killing the Joker and dumping his body around the city had really wiped them out.

The sun was already in its afternoon descent by the time Tim dive-bombed the Batcave, its warm yellow glow perfect for a lazy afternoon nap. Tim didn’t have time to sleep though, not when he had the coolest, most amazing totally awesome hoard member to reintegrate with his favorite humans. Who needed the sun anyway? Tim got all his essential vitamins from the warm fuzzies his hoard gave him. That big ball in the sky could extinguish for all he cared.

He flitted through the entrance tunnels, winding his sinuous body around impossibly sharp corners and doing the occasional loop-de-loop. Jason was still struggling, but he’d lacked the oxygen to yell once they’d reached high altitudes and still hadn’t gotten it back. Or maybe it was the wind resistance? He was fine though. Cass had taught Tim what altitudes to stay at when his hoard wanted rides.

After what felt like hours but was really only two minutes, Tim heard the Waynes talking in the main cave, voices echoing off the chasms as he got closer. Good, they were all home. That would save time. Tim would use those glorious extra seconds to tell Bruce his stupidly long underground driveway was stupid and had delayed the family reunion.

“— need rest, Master Bruce, you can’t help him in your state,” Alfred was saying.

“It’s my fault. I pushed him away from the case. If *he* has Tim, we can’t afford to pause,” Bruce growled back. "I'm not losing another son."

"He was last sighted near the water tower on 8th. We can get him back, we just need to find the right safe house." Hmm, Dick was pacing really fast. That usually meant he was agitated. Did he not have enough cereal today?

“And you will not find it without at least an hour’s rest, sirs. Do not make me pull out the sedatives.”

Wow, even Alfred sounded distressed. That wasn’t good. Something really bad must have happened. Luckily, Tim was here to save the day and brighten their moods.

He tore into the main room with a happy roar and landed as close to the dinosaur as he could get without knocking it over. Its death would come soon, but not today. No, today was a day for triumph, not hate crimes against theropods.

“Tim!” Dick gasped.

“Master Tim,” Alfred sighed with relief.

“Son!” Bruce yelled. Which, what?

Tim tumbled back into human shape, transforming faster than he ever had in his life. He felt a snap as his vertebrae realigned, like one of those slap-on bracelets getting straightened out. *Wow,* that was fun. He’d have to do it again later, but no distractions yet.

He held up the nearly hyperventilating Jason and grinned proudly.

“Look who I found!” he beamed. “Vintage hoard member, get!”

Chapter End Notes

Ah yes, Dealing With Traumatized Youth, the book that every Bat defaults to when they encounter Tim. Bruce owns a signed copy, first edition, and lends it to other supes when they mention wanting to adopt.

Talia has her own copy and uses it as a doorstop.

Meanwhile, back in Crime Alley.

Steph *still looking for Tim*: Why do I feel like I'm missing something important? 🤨

We Put the Home In Homicide

Chapter Summary

Tim's hoard is finally in one place; a happy family, murder hobos included!

Chapter Notes

Guess who has 13 cavities and 9 other cosmetic repairs~! It's ya girl with the hereditarily bad teeth. Youch. You know its bad when even the dentist feels sorry for you. I just got half of them filled today and the pain is real. Also I miss chewing. :(

adds this to my list of bad things

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason gasped for air, gripping Tim like a lifeline.

The Waynes looked from Tim to Jason, then back to Tim, jaws slack. Bruce visibly leaned against the Batcomputer to catch his balance.

Tim continued to beam.

“What —” Dick stuttered. “Wait, Tim, what —”

“It’s Jason!” Tim said helpfully, since they all seemed to be a little slow right now. “He’s the Red Hood, my murder bro. He’s the one who left all the good snacks, isn’t this great? Tell them this is great, Jason.”

“GET AWAY FROM ME!”

Jason elbowed Tim and rolled to his feet, pulling an extra pistol out of nowhere and waving it defensively. Tim pouted. He didn't hug people often, the least Jason could do was let him savor the moment.

"I don't know what you are, but what the hell!?" Jason said, staring at Tim like he'd just eaten his dog (a look Tim was familiar with). "You're a — a —"

"A dragon!" Tim said, the same moment Alfred said "Language, master Jason."

"Sorry, Alfie, I'll put it in the swear jar," Jason said automatically, then slapped a hand against his own mouth. "Shit."

"It *is* you," Dick breathed. "Jay!"

Jason was immediately tackled. That made two embraces in less than an hour. Perfect, Jason needed lots of hugs.

"Get off me, Dickface! Ugh, stop crying, I just washed this shirt —*Dick!"*

Dick did not let go. In fact, he held on tighter. Tim smirked. At last, someone else would suffer the octopus arms.

"How is this possible?" Alfred asked, slowly approaching the struggling humans. "Master Jason, we *buried* you."

"Yeah, I noticed," Jason said. "Would it have hurt you to make the grave a little shallower? Six feet under is a terrible place to wake up."

Dick made a choked, horrified laugh and somehow squeezed even harder. Jason wheezed and slapped his back.

"Can't breathe, you idiot, are you trying to kill me again?"

“Too soon, Jay,” Dick sniffled.

“It’s been years, I’ll use gallows humor if I want. Now let go or I’ll shoot you —”

“Jason?”

Bruce’s soft, watery voice made everyone freeze. Tim slowly turned and grimaced. Those were tears in the corner of Bruce’s eyes. Great.

“Jason, it’s really you?” Bruce said uncertainly.

“No, it’s the ghost of Christmas Past. Of course it’s me, old man!” Jason grumbled, sinking deeper into Dick’s hug. “What, can’t bear to look at me?”

"You’re *real.”*

“What else would I be?”

Well, given how many hallucinations Bruce had apparently had before Tim came along, probably a lot of things.

Bruce swallowed, face blank but frame taught. Outwardly, he didn’t look much different from normal, but Tim was a pro at reading Bruce’s tells. Right now Bruce was clearly in the throes of Feelings.

“What, cat got your tongue? Upset that your biggest mistake is back to remind you how you failed?” Jason growled.

Hm, Jason didn’t seem to be as attuned to Bruce-ese anymore. Maybe he’d lost his touch after being gone so long? They’d have to fix that too.

“You were too late,” Jason continued, finally shaking off Dick’s arms. “I had to die knowing you weren’t going to make it, which *fine,* I can accept that. But the fact that the Joker was still kicking? Old man, I never felt so much disrespect for you —”

“You’re *back*,” Bruce repeated.

That seemed to throw Jason for a loop, stopping his tirade in its tracks.

“Yes, *I’m back,* we’ve been over this,” He snapped. “And unavenged until — “

“You’re *alive.*”

Jason’s face twitched. “Okay, the broken record thing is seriously getting old. Did you get brain damage while I was gone?”

Dick choked a laugh. “He’s always been touched in the head, Little Wing. He didn’t need an extra round with Killer Croc to prove that.”

Jason snorted and seemed to take in the rest of the family again. Alfred was dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief, and Dick was a snotty abomination. Both of them looked absolutely wrecked. The wind left Jason’s sails a bit.

“Like it means anything,” Jason grumbled, returning the gun to its hidden holster. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and glared at the floor. “Like the kid said, I’m Red Hood. A murderous Crime Lord. You don't want me here —”

Jason didn’t get to finish that sentence either, because Bruce slammed into him and smothered him in a hug to end all hugs.

“I don’t care what you are, you’re *home* now,” Bruce whispered. Tim only heard it because of his heightened senses. “I’ll have a moral crisis later. Right now, nothing else matters.”

Jason's breathing hitched. "You can't mean that."

"I do."

"I killed people."

"Yes."

"I put eight heads in a duffle bag."

"I know."

"I kidnapped Robin!"

Bruce glanced at Tim. "If he didn't want to go with you, he wouldn't have."

Tim nodded proudly. Good Bruce, he was finally learning.

Jason shoved Bruce away. "That's not an excuse, B! I don't care if he's some kind of freaky Toothless knockoff, you need to look after him properly."

"They are!" Tim said.

"We're trying," Dick said at the same time, longsufferingly. "It hasn't been easy. Little Wing, where have you been you all these —"

"Oh no, I already did the tragic backstory thing once today, and it got me kidnapped by a giant murder lizard," Jason said. "No more flashbacks! Now explain why the hell you let this kid's evil

parents yeet off to Micronesia after giving him scars."

"Malaysia," Tim corrected.

"The country isn't the point. The distance is!" Jason said, baring his teeth at Bruce in a dragon-worthy snarl, eyes a vicious green. "I didn't come back from the dead to find our you turned into a foster kid's nightmare placement, B, so *get talking."*

"Your eyes, they're —" Bruce breathed. "The Lazarus Pit."

"Old news," Jason snapped. "Can we get back to the kid?"

"Better yet," Tim added from where he was cross-legged on the floor. "Can someone give Jason another hug? He needs affection."

"I *do not* —"

"On it," Dick said.

Jason hissed as the octopus arms returned. He wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. Alfred was even taking a commemorative photo to mark the occasion.

Unfortunately, bringing up Tim had distracted Bruce from his long-lost son.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" he asked Tim, helping him stand up. "You went missing last night. Dick and I were terrified."

"Sorry, I was out later than expected," Tim said breezily. "Jason and I were bonding."

"And what would that entail?" Alfred asked.

“Just stuff,” Tim said, smoothing his cape.

Alfred raised one eyebrow. Tim gave him Bambi eyes and didn’t elaborate. What happened in Murder Club stayed in Murder Club.

Bruce cupped Tim’s cheek and made him look at him again. “Tim, we thought you were dead. You can’t disappear like that.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Tim said. “I was going to come home right away, but I ran into Jason, then I found out he *was* Jason, and then I cried a lot and got sleepy and kind of forgot to stay awake. But I came back with Jason as soon as I could. Aren’t you happy?”

“More than anything,” Bruce said. “But I was scared out of my mind. I thought I’d lost you. Please, don’t do this again.”

Tim nodded. He’d have to keep Bruce’s separation anxiety in mind for future adventures. He was getting to be as bad as Jack.

“Perhaps I will go prepare us a spot of tea,” Alfred said, smiling at Dick and Jason’s hug, which was becoming a wrestling match. “It would do us all a lot of good. We haven’t had a family tea in too long.”

“Yes!” Tim said, fist pumping the air. It had been at least a week. “Today is the best day ever. We finally have the whole hoard back together! Now all six of us can be happy for the rest of forever. Alfred, can I have the licorice kind?”

“Of course,” Alfred said.

“Hoard?!” Jason squawked, shoving Dick’s face away from him. “I didn’t agree to that!”

“Six?” Dick said, voice muffled by Jason’s hand.

“Tim, there are only five of us,” Bruce said. “How much sleep did you get?”

“Plenty, and I totally counted right,” Tim said. “Me, you, Dick, Alfred, Jason, and Cass. That’s six.”

“Who’s Cass?” Bruce asked, tilting his head to the left.

Tim tilted his too. “You know, *Cass*? Your daughter?”

The way everyone suddenly froze, you’d think Tim had just announced he wanted to become Joker Junior.

“My *what*?” Bruce said.

“Your daughter,” Tim repeated. "You know, the one that's been living here for months?"

She should have introduced herself last night for a Halloween surprise. That had been the plan, Tim just thought he’d miss it due to his own busy Joker schedule. Did she forget? What possibly could have made her forget?

The Waynes looked even more confused, which meant Tim may have accidentally ruined Cass’s grand reveal and was now in danger of Death By Steph for the umpteenth time, but that was a problem for Future Tim.

Luckily, Cass was a genius at improvising.

She dropped down from the rafters, still dressed in her Black Bat uniform. She landed directly behind Bruce, cloaked in so many shadows Tim had to squint to see her even in the fluorescent lights.

“Me,” Cass said, tugging Bruce’s sleeve to get his attention.

The entire Wayne family’s unholy screeches of terror would live rent-free in Tim’s head for the rest of eternity.

This truly was the day that kept on giving.

Chapter End Notes

Steph: TIM, PLEASE, IF YOU'RE ALIVE SAY SOMETHING!
Hobo: My name is Tim.
Steph: Congrats, you can be my ex's body double for the next rager I drag him to.
Hobo: My name is no longer Tim.
Steph: That's what I thought.

I won't be updating for a couple weeks, most likely. I'm leaving the Broken Bad Apartment and doing a fun soul searching road trip, so I won't have much internet access. It doesn't help I plan to drive past some missile ranges to visit Alien hotspots and explore caves. If I get abducted, Raven will tell you. I have a good feeling about this trip though. :D

Two For the Price of One, Bat Dad!

Chapter Summary

Time for answers and cookies! But mostly cookies.

Chapter Notes

Hey yall!

First off, BIG HAND TO RAVEN FOR BETAING! She read this chapter and left tons of amazing comments... and then I, the resident dumbass, realized I'd sent her the wrong version of the chapter, so she ended up betaing twice. All hail Raven, for she is a saint and I am but the devil. Praise be to her and Hellfire for me. (Srsly, sorry Ray!)

Anyway

It's been a month. Crazy! I ran out of my backlog, moved, went on vacation, and had a lot of insanity happen between.
-got caught camping in a thunderstorm
-Chupucabra, my nighttime visitor?
-Almost lost two fingers via the car trunk impersonating a French revolutionary and attempting to guillotine moi. My nonexistent violin skills were nearly lost forever, dudes.

Anyway, thank you for all y'alls patience! I can't promise to post as often from now on because I'm taking a ton of credits and working on several other big projects, so one of two things will happen:
1) I am busy and stressed therefore will not post.
2) I am busy and stressed and therefore will procrastinate my tasks and post TONS.

There will be no in-between. You have been warned. The state of my mental health and the regularity that I post on Ao3 are actually so related.

Anywho, have a good one yall. Enjoy the chapter!

Edited immediately after I posed because typos are like mosquitos: You slap yourself silly to smash them, only to miss them all. ALSO added a few lines at the end :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reactions to Cass's entrance were perfect. If Tim were a judge, he'd give Cass 10/10 for perfect execution. He was so proud of her. The Waynes were still in shock, but once they got over their minor heart attacks, Tim knew they would be too.

Jason was the first to stop bluescreening.

"You had a whole-ass child in your house that you *didn't know about!?"* he said. "What the hell, old man, I thought you were a detective."

Bruce stuttered like an old car trying to rev its engine in midwinter, at a loss of coherency.

"Cass transcends detecting," Tim said. He jumped up and gave her a hello hug. "She's been living in the attic all summer. Pretty impressive, right?"

Cass tugged off her mask, revealing her beautiful smiling face. Her hair was a sweaty mess from being in costume who knew how long and she smelled like the attic, but she glowed with mirth as she made a heart with her hands. "Yes. I am attic ghost. Haunt you with affection."

The Waynes' jaws dropped. The longer they stared at Tim and Cass the more theylooked like someone had tied a lasso around their legs and connected it to a freight train that dragged them seventy miles across the Appalachian countryside.

"B, do you think Jack forgot to mention his other child?" Dick said hesitantly.

Bruce blinked slowly, still processing. "Maybe."

Wait, did Tim and Cass really look that similar or were the Waynes just confused because they were both Asian? No, doubtless they merely sensed how perfect she and Tim were for each other. Yeah, that was probably it.

“Cass isn’t my sibling, Dick,” Tim said patiently. “She’s yours and Jason’s! But I found her and we’re soulmates, so I get dibs.”

“Brothers all mine,” Cass said, spreading her arms wide. “Even bonus red one!”

“Hey, I’m not part of this family,” Jason said. “Don’t treat me like some kind of buy one get one.”

Tim snorted and rolled his eyes. “You’re better than family, Jason, you’re hoard! And hoard is forever.”

Dragons didn’t rely on dumb paperwork or consent to seal the deal with their bonds. Jason was here to stay whether he liked it or not, no take backsies.

“Yes, no choice.” Cass grinned. “Give in, big little brother! Come to dark side.”

Jason scowled, but Cass’s smile was lethal and Tim had been teaching her Bambi eyes. Even though he was confused and annoyed, Tim saw his shoulders relax.

Bruce, meanwhile, frowned at Cass, analyzing her with his patented Dad Vision. Cass analyzed him right back. Neither of them blinked. It was like watching a horse girl meet her equine buddy at the beginning of a Hallmark movie.

“You must be the one eating Alfred’s cookies,” Bruce said finally.

Cass nodded. The Cookie Caper was her war of attrition against Alfred, and currently she was winning by eight cookies.

Dick gasped in outrage. “You!? Alfred has been on a warpath. I thought I was going to get disowned.”

“I daresay, this does explain why I could never find crumbs on you,” Alfred said, smoothing his suit and pretending like he hadn’t dropped his tea tray a second ago. It was the only time Tim had ever seen him visibly shocked. He was *totally* saving the camera footage for posterity.

Cass grinned. “No evidence. Perfect crime.”

Everyone looked impressed, as they should.

“I have so many questions,” Jason said, hand over his face. “*So many.* And a lot of profanity I’m going to pepper throughout the interrogation.”

“Same, Little Wing, same,” Dick said.

Bruce just grunted, once more at a loss for words.

Since that was his normal state of being, Tim took it as a good thing.

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According to Alfred, the best place to answer questions was over tea, so they were all shooed to the parlor for some proper hoard time while he prepped a cuppa. They weren’t allowed out until they’d all “communicated properly” and explained things.

Explanations were so outdated. Tim was over that vibe. Scratch that, he’d never been into it to begin with. As far as Tim was concerned, all the important things had been said already. If people wanted to know anything else, they could figure it out themselves.

But Tim understood that humans needed more time to process. They loved complicating things and talking. Luckily, more time with his hoard was always good in Tim’s book.

He purred happily from where he was curled up next to Jason on the sofa. Cass was on his other side, wrapped around his arm and continuing to radiate smugness. Dick was eyeing them with extreme jealousy, but Dick would get his allotment of Cass cuddles soon, so he could deal.

His humans, meanwhile, were doing as Alfred told them and attempting to communicate.

It wasn't going well.

"Why is he Robin? No, scratch that, why is he in your *house?* You hate metahumans," Jason said. "No way you'd ever lower yourself to having one as a sidekick."

They'd gone from freaking out over Cass to freaking out over Tim, which was hilarious because everything was perfect now. The hoard was all together again, so there was nothing to worry about. Maybe they just liked arguing?

"I don't hate metas, Jaylad, I simply dislike babysitting them. They have no survival skills." Bruce sighed. "The number of times Clark has flown into windows is proof of that."

"Yeah! Besides, I'm not a meta *or* a human," Tim said. "And Bruce doesn't tell me what to do. I'm his partner, not a sidekick."

Their whole relationship started with Bruce growling at him to go away and Tim doing the exact opposite. Noncompliance was a core tenant of his Robin brand.

"He's a dragon hybrid with shape-shifting abilities. It's magic, not a gene," Bruce explained tiredly.

"It *is* a gene*,"* Tim said. "Science is in my blood!"

He was pretty sure the spell on him and Janet was genetic at this point, and if it was a gene, it was science. Probably. Maybe. At least to him.

“Whatever. Where did you even find him?” Jason grumbled, running a hand through his hair. “This is Gotham. I know it’s full of weirdos, but most magicians steer clear cuz of those ‘cursed city abandoned by God’ rumors. It’s not exactly a mystical creature hotspot.”

“Well yeah, but we didn’t find him,” Dick said.

Jason rolled his eyes. “Ha ha, yeah right. What, did he just randomly show up on the doorstep one day and demand to be Robin?”

The long, awkward pause was very telling.

Jason dropped his hand, looking dead inside. “Seriously?”

“There may have been some light blackmail involved,” Dick said delicately.

“And a PowerPoint,” Bruce added.

Both of them avoided eye contact with Jason, whose face was going through the five stages of bamboozlement with a bonus smattering of irritation.

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “That’s all it took for you to give him a dead boy’s suit? You’re Batman, blackmail is *your* thing!”

“But he was so cute,” Dick whined. “Just look at him, Jason. He had a dox folder with our civilian IDs and everything. How could we *not* take him in after that?”

“And it was a great PowerPoint,” Tim added proudly. There had been over 200 slides; he’d even added animations.

Jason did some of Alfred’s patented meditation breaths, looking a second away from going for his gun again. Not for violent reasons, just emotional support. It was definitely his security blanket. Tim would have to buy more for him as a welcome-back present.

“You two are complete idiots. I should have stayed with the league,” he said. “Hell, I should go back and take Tim with me. At least then he’d be around people with common sense.”

“League bad,” Cass chided, squeezing Tim extra hard. He squeaked in surprise. “No assassins corrupting little brothers. Bats instead.”

“How about a little murder?” Tim wheedled. “Just for bad people?”

“Bad dragon. No snacks for you.”

“But *Cass —”*

Another squeeze. Tim settled back into the hug and grumbled under his breath, wishing he could say no to her. Alas, Cass was impervious to arguing. Anything she didn’t like she punched or cuddled into submission, and it worked every time.

Dick looked ever more jealous, plus a bit awed. He must have *really* wanted Cass to hug him.

A few minutes later, Alfred returned with tea. Cass flapped her hands in excitement; she always stole it from the kitchen at night, so she’d never had it hot before. The sight made everyone coo.

“I trust there has been suitable communication?” the butler said.

“Yep!” Tim chirped happily and sipped his licorice flavor. He hated the candy, but it tasted *so good* in tea form. Best leaf juice ever.

“No. All we’ve done is reestablish Bruce’s idiocy,” Jason said, glaring into his teacup before drinking it like a man lost in the desert for forty years. How long had he gone without Alfred Tea? Weeks? Months? Years? No wonder he was murder-crazy. He was in withdrawal.

Bruce wasn't touching his. He was staring at Jason with broken-hearted vulnerability again. Any minute there would be more tears, but at least they'd be the good kind that came from happiness. Tim could handle happy crying, but the sad stuff made him freak out.

Jason continued to sip his tea so passive-aggressively he deserved an Oscar, pointedly ignoring said looks of tender love.

Meanwhile, the tea was making everyone else get super emotional. Dick also had misty eyes and was seeming to remember that Jason had come back to life instead of back from an extended study abroad.

"You're really back, and you got *taller*," Dick sniffed. "How is that even possible? You were my little mini-wheat, but now you've become shredded wheat."

Jason grimaced in disgust. "Dick, I'll literally pay you never to call me that again."

"I have so much to apologize for," Dick continued. "So many hugs I didn't give you. Maybe this is a dream? Or a vision. I'll take either at this point, but if it *is* a dream, I want to know why I imagined you so ripped —"

Jason set down his teacup with a loud clink. "You're not imagining shit, Dickface. This is reality, get with the program."

"Language, master Jason," Alfred chided. He held out the swear jar.

Jason grumbled and threw a five-dollar bill inside. "I came back from the dead, I should be allowed to cuss."

"Not while there are impressionable ears around, sir."

Cass and Tim looked up from the cookie tray they were raiding in surprise.

Jason frowned in their direction. “Fine.”

“I’m not impressionable,” Tim defended. “Cass is, but she already knows all the swears. I taught her at least five languages’ worth.”

English, Chinese, Spanish, ASL, Canadian French, Bruce Grunts, and even the Kryptonian ones Superman had accidentally said within hearing distance of Dick years ago. Tim made sure Cass memorized them all, as was his duty.

Alfred was not impressed. “If those were spoken under my roof, then you know the price, Master Tim.”

He held out the swear jar. Tim sighed and put one of his cookies inside. This was karma, wasn’t it?

“I buried you. This . . . doesn’t seem real,” Bruce said, still three steps behind the current conversation. “Jaylad, if this is a second chance, please —”

“Oh no, we are *not* doing this,” Jason scowled. “You had your second chance, old man. He’s sitting right next to me, and you failed him.”

Tim blinked and looked around for an extra person, confused. What was Jason talking about?

“You’re a despicable human and a worse dad, and I’m sick of pretending otherwise,” Jason continued. “The cycle of child soldiers ends with me!”

“Because you’re clearly a bastion of sanity right now,” Dick said.

“Shut up, Dickwing, I’m not your damn brother anymore. I have *transcended* this family.”

“Language,” Alfred said again.

Jason growled and put another dollar in the swear jar. Cass swiped a cookie off his plate and stuffed it into her mouth like a chipmunk, mouthing “Dickwing” to herself with glee. Tim decided to count that as her new word of the day.

“Adoption certificates don’t expire,” Bruce said, taking a bracing sip of his tea. Peppermint, extra strong. He must have been up all night if he needed that boost. “Jason, I know we parted on . . . bad terms, but you’re my son. The Lazarus Pit may be distorting your perception, but I’ve always loved —”

“It’s not distorting anything. I see more clearly than ever!” Jason snapped.

“Jaylad, I know what its side effects are, you don’t need to pretend you’re all right. If you can just stay calm —”

“I AM PERFECTLY CALM!”

Tim rubbed his ear. If Jason didn’t want to be a Bat, he was be a dead ringer for Black Canary’s successor.

“Master Jason, we’ve talked about this,” Alfred said. “Tone, not volume. You’re letting your temper get the better of you.”

Jason took a deep breath, but his eyes were still doing the glowy green thing. “I do *not* have a temper. I was *acing* Talia’s anger management course before I dropped out.”

“Talia?” Tim said, confused. “Like, that al Ghul lady?”

“She teaches anger management?” Bruce looked horrified.

All Tim knew about Talia was that she and Bruce dated and that Dick had trauma from third-wheeling them as Robin. Also that she helped run an international eco-terrorist cell of assassins with her immortal dad, but that seemed less important than *Dick* being grossed out from PDA.

“Not important,” Jason snapped. He got to his feet and pulled Tim up with him. “It’s always ‘justice this’ and “vengeance that,’ but where was *my* vengeance, Bruce? Where were you when it counted? You can put all the criminals you want into ICU, but it doesn’t fix the problem. Gotham’s people live in fear, so I’m cleaning up the city properly.”

“Murder isn’t the answer, Jason,” Bruce began. Tim could *sense* the morality lecture incoming.

“YES, IT IS! God, you never *listen,”* Jason seethed. Tim gave his monologue skills a solid 6/10. Very dramatic, but lacking in props. “I’m the Red Hood, and I’m doing your job better than you ever did. Gotham is mine now, and so is Tim. He’s coming with me.”

Dick and Bruce’s heartbroken expressions were quickly replaced with alarm as Jason pressed Tim into a suffocating side hug. Wait, was *Tim* a prop? Awesome, that automatically bumped this to 8/10. Audience participation was next level.

“Oh no no no, you can’t do that, Jay,” Dick said. “You’re not equipped to raise a juvenile dragon.”

“Don’t tell me what I can or can’t do,” Jason said. “I don’t care if he’s some kind of winged murder lizard, you don’t get to put baby dragons in tights and set them loose on thugs. The booty shorts should have died with me, Dickwing, instead of endangering another innocent child!”

“Innocent.” Bruce echoed, face doing complicated gymnastics.

“Booty — you *wanted* my old uniform!” Dick defended, scandalized. “It was a classic!”

“Whatever, I was young and peer-pressured into it. You two don’t deserve Tim. He needs a safe home. Heck, so does what’s-her-face. I’ll adopt her too.”

Cass looked up from where she was demolishing the cookie tray and gave a double thumbs up.

“Jason, you don’t want to do this,” Bruce said, looking truly alarmed. “You’re seventeen, you can’t adopt *anyone.* You’re still my legal responsibility.”

“Death certificate trumps adoption certificate. I do what I want.”

“Wait, it does?” Tim said gleefully. “Does it work with custody too?”

If it did, that simplified so much. Janet would be ecstatic.

Dick pointed a stern finger at Tim. “Don’t you dare even think about it, young man. No faking your death, or I’ll make you watch Puff the Magic Dragon with me again.”

Tim hissed and hid his face in Jason’s shoulder. Bad hoard member! See if Tim brought him any more surprise siblings.

“I believe there has simply been another misunderstanding about Tim’s home life,” Alfred said smoothly, handing Cass a napkin. “Perhaps it would be best to pause this argument until we are all on the same page.”

Jason snorted. “Sure, explain away. I’ll listen.”

The way he said it did not, in fact, make it sound like he’d listen.

“Wonderful,” Alfred said, patting Tim and Jason on the back. “Then I shall fetch the PowerPoint Master Bruce showed the Justice League. It should cover the topics you’re concerned about. Rest assured that all is quite well, although it is certainly not normal.”

Ooh, Tim loved a good PowerPoint.

He tugged Jason back onto the couch. Tim and Cass wrapped themselves around Jason’s arms and settled in for an awesome night of family fun and dry slideshows of baby pictures narrated by Bruce’s monotone voice. Tim’s favorite kind.

***

Jason stared dead-eyed at the photo of Tim's parents, looking like he wished he'd never come back to life.

It was a picture of Jack and Janet taken last year in Guam. Jack was hugging Janet's dragon form and grinning at the camera like it was the best day of his life. Meanwhile, Janet was glaring directly at the viewer with pale, murderous eyes that shone with unholy light. Her scales were artfully speckled with blood, and a tendril of smoke wisped out from between her teeth.

Jason set down the photo and put his head in his hands. "I cannot even with this."

"There's a PDF I can lend you." Bruce said. "They are good people. It's not safe for Tim to be near them, but they have his best interests at heart."

"So, no abuse?"

"No abuse."

Jason groaned into his hands, the picture of Done.

"Don't worry, it's an easy mistake to make," Dick said, patting his shoulder consolingly. "We've all been there."

"Can it, Dickwing. I don't want to hear it. Are we even going to talk about the fact you guys had an entire ninja child living in your attic?" Jason said. "I feel like that needs to be addressed."

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose. "One crisis at a time, please. We'll get to that later."

They said, as if they hadn't had a perfectly marvelous introduction to Cass already. The fact she'd lived in their home so long without them realizing it wasn't even shocking. She was just that good.

Humans, honestly. So fussy about everything. For being vigilantes who fought creeps in costume all day, surprises really weren't their thing.

Tim was so glad he wasn't cursed to be like them. He had some of Jack's DNA, but luckily Janet's was dominant. It felt good to have his head screwed on straight, although being the common sense holder in his hoard did grow old sometimes.

Anyway, the Waynes didn't have to worry about Cass. Tim had everything taken care of, up to and including forging the adoption paperwork.

He'd helped Cass learn to write her name especially for this. It was only right she'd penned the start of a new chapter of her life with her own hand, even though the letters were super wonky. Tim was *so* framing it once they got the papers back.

His hoard looked like they'd been slapped by a rubber chicken when he mentioned that though.

"Tim, you can't fake an adoption," Bruce said.

"Yes, I can. Besides, you were going to adopt her anyway, I'm just speeding things up," Tim said.

"That's not the point —"

"You don't want me?" Cass said, heartbroken.

Everyone froze, pinned by the vulnerable, sad look in her eyes.

"That's — of course we do —" Bruce stuttered. "But legally —"

“Want a family,” she said. *“You* family. Good people.”

“Kid, I’m flattered, but you have literally so many better options than these stooges,” Jason deadpanned.

“No want me?” Cass frowned, making her eyes even bigger and wobbling her chin just like Tim and Steph had taught her.

“O-oh, of course we want you. It’s just Tim needs to learn boundaries and, I mean, uh . . . Jason, help,” Dick said, looking desperately at his long-lost brother.

“Don’t look at me, I’m legally dead. This mess is on you.”

Dick’s jaw dropped, either in offense at being abandoned, the death reference, or both. “Jay!”

“Don’t worry, Cass, they don’t get a choice in this. It’s *my* hoard, after all, and I found you fair and square,” Tim said, patting her head. “Bruce is probably just sad I hogged the paperwork. You’re impossible not to love.”

Bruce was clutching his chest, already crumbling under the force of Cass’s sadness. Tim was familiar with the look; B was criminally weak to Bambi eyes, after all.

“Not what Cain said,” Cass muttered, hiding her face in her hair.

“Your bio dad is a loser. Just tell me I can kill him, and I will.” Him and anyone else who wronged or mildly inconvenienced her.

“No murder.” she pinched his cheeks. “Killing bad. Is a better way.”

Spoilsport.

“Oh my God, she even has a moral code,” Dick whispered. He and Bruce looked like drowning men that had just seen a life preserver floating in the ocean near their shipwreck.

“*And* she’s a vigilante, technically an orphan, and super good at Uno. I told you she’s perfect for you,” Tim said. “Best secret hoard member ever.”

None of his humans could refute that. Tim was a master of logic, after all.

***

The rest of the night was prying Jason’s story from his no-longer dead hands. He’d been super open with Tim, but he now kept stopping his flashbacks to yell at Bruce for being the worst vengeance poster boy to exist, so it was taking a while.

“As a murder victim, I reserve the right to kill at will. It’s how I’m reclaiming my life!”

“That is *not* how it works, Jaylad.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

At which point Bruce pulled out the spray bottle and sprayed Jason in the face. Everyone froze in surprise.

“. . . What was that for?” Jason demanded.

Bruce set the bottle down sheepishly. “Apologies. Habit.”

“How is that a habit?!”

Hmm, maybe now that the humans were becoming targets, they'd sign Tim's petition to outlaw spray bottles and laser lights from the manor. A dragon could dream.

By dark, Tim was ready to call it a night. Jason seemed to care more about arguing with Bruce than actually making a point, and Cass had slunk back into the vents to get some alone time, still not used to being around so many people. Alfred was getting her a room set up (though Cass had emphatically explained how she wanted to live in the attic forever, since it called her to soul like butter on toast), and Dick was getting ready for patrol.

"You're still not *listening*," Jason seethed. "Your no-kill rule is hurting more people than it's helping. I'm only getting rid of the people that deserve to die."

"You sound like a cop," Bruce growled.

"I do not!" Jason stomped toward the front door. If he were a cartoon character, there'd be steam coming from his ears. "That's it, I'm out of here. I'm *not* dealing with this. I'll see you on the streets, B. Talk to me when you get your head out of your ass."

What? No. Unacceptable.

Tim was across the room and clinging to Jason's arm in less than a second, digging his heels into the plush carpet to stop him from leaving. "You can't go, I just got you back!"

Jason huffed, trying to shake him off. "I have to start patrol. Child traffickers aren't going to kill themselves, Timbo."

Yes, but Tim wasn't about to let him run away to do that. It would compromise Bruce and Dick's emotional states, not to mention Tim's.

"You're staying," he decided.

"No, I'm not."

Tim tightened his grip and narrowed his eyes. Bad hoard member. “I said. You’re. Staying.”

Jason yelped as he was suddenly pinned down by Tim’s dragon form. Tim wrapped his tail around Jason’s leg and flopped onto the ground, making sure plenty of weight was on him. No escape.

“Let me go, you glorified firecracker! You’re crushing me —Tim, *I mean it!”*

Poor Jason, he was doing it all wrong. If he really wanted to be let go, he would have fake-cried. Acting angry just made Tim happier. That was a good emotion, very useful for getting things done. Just not right now. Now was for cuddling with abandon.

"Dick, get him off me. I can barely breathe," Jason gasped.

Dick grinned down at Jason. "I dunno, Little Wing. I mean, you *are* legally dead. This seems like your mess to clean up."

"YOU GODDAM SON OF A—"

Tim purred happily, glad things were finally, finally perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Raven *betaing an stumbles on the shredded wheat sentence*: This sentence is a crime against humanity. But I shall still watch humanity fall to preserve this sentence.

Meanwhile, on the comms:

Babs: Steph, go home and get some rest. You won't be any use if you're dead on your feet.
Steph:But Tim could be ACTUALLY dead-
Babs: Look me in the eye and tell me that little weirdo wouldn't drag you home himself if you saw how tired you are.
Steph: ... That's not fair, Babs. You're a jerk. But touche.
Babs: I'll keep the algorithm running. Don't worry, it's going to be okay. Now go hug you mom

and crash for twelve hours.
Steph: Roger that, boss.

Meanwhile, Tim is having the time of his life.

Bonus! Tim sounds, for all you wondering exactly what he sounds like as a dragon! ^-^

Nazgul scream: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHqd56MkLRs&ab_channel=WoodrowLloyd
Shelob screeching (timestamp: after 2:50): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gVBVdgs3Sw&ab_channel=TheLotrTV
Tasmanian Devil: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQveUwOehhQ&ab_channel=MindRelaxationMusic
Xenomorph Alien: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rx7Z9krgTz8&ab_channel=CeceGames
Velociraptor: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifgCsFPo3jE&ab_channel=Nickstens
Cat purring: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycHTiTSCBR4&ab_channel=mirmirs

We’re Gonna Need a Bigger Nest

Chapter Summary

The kidnapped becomes the kidnapper.

Chapter Notes

Had a horse-girl moment of my own this week when my professor and I talked in movie quotes with manic excitement before remembering class was in session and we were supposed to be talking about Whitman's poetry, not The Three Amigos.

I regret nothing.

Thank you to Raven for betaing again! I hope all goes well and that Steve (fic character) finds the holy grail soon—AKA, mental health.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the end, Alfred made up another guest room (Jason had not wanted to go back to his old “nerd room”) and told Jason he was staying the night. The combination of his Combat Butler Grandpa ordering him to stay and Tim acting as his literal ball and chain were enough to get Jason to stop resisting for the night.

Mostly.

Tim found him trying to climb out the second story window around 3 a.m., but that was easily solved. Tim was getting great at transforming really fast, and he made sure to cuddle Jason the rest of the night so he couldn’t run.

The next morning, he bluntly told Tim had had to go back to Crime Alley, but Tim tuned that out. He grabbed Jason before he even got off the grounds and made him come to breakfast.

“I’m being held here against my will,” Jason growled. “You’re kidnappers, all of you!”

“I mean, that’s how we originally got you, so I’m not complaining,” Dick shrugged.

Jason threw a pancake at him.

“Master Jason, *manners* in the manor,” Alfred scolded as he handed Cass a bowl of fruit.

“Fine. Sorry, Alfie,” Jason grumbled. “I guess I can at least stay for one more meal. . .”

Tim beamed and dumped pickle juice on his yogurt. “You should, Alfred makes the best food.”

He added some raw eggs and broccoli as well for texture. Jason looked at Tim’s parfait like it had grown limbs and shot a child.

“What the hell are you doing to that poor dish?” he asked, green as an underripe tomato.

“Improving it,” Tim said. “You should try it.”

Because he was polite and forgiving, Tim pretended not to see literally everyone else quickly shaking their heads. There was just no accounting for bad taste.

“Alfred, he’s committing war crimes with your food. Do something,” Jason said.

“I’m afraid I’ve had to choose my battles,” Alfred sighed. “Believe it or not, this is an improvement.”

“What was he eating before, rats?”

“And dogs and cats,” Tim said cheerfully. “But the bird bites you left me were my favorite. Especially the gold ones. Do you have any more at home?”

Jason choked on his orange juice. “What? *No,* Tim, those were death threats!”

“Very scrumptious death threats. You should be a chef.” They were in Tim’s top ten Gotham street foods.

Jason thunked his head onto the table. For an instant, Tim swore he saw his will to live leave his body.

“Take me back to the cave, Plato,” he grumbled into the tablecloth.

Bruce patted his shoulder in solidarity. “Still want to adopt him?”

“Screw you. Yes.”

Tim rolled his eyes. One of these days they’d remember they were *his*, but until then he’d let them have their adoption illusions. After all, he was polite that way.

***

After breakfast, Tim FaceTimed his parents to show off his retro hoard member.

“See, Jason’s alive! Isn’t it great?” Tim beamed into the camera. “I found him while I was doing important hoard business, and I get to keep him!”

“That’s wonderful, kiddo,” Jack said, squinting at Jason for a second in confusion before shrugging. “I’m sure Bruce is very happy too.”

“He’s happier than *ever,*” Tim agreed. “You should see him.”

Bruce was extremely emotional about Jason, despite disagreeing about the murder stuff. Currently, he making a “Moral Code” PowerPoint to convince Jason to stop being the Red Hood. One of the slides was “being a good role model for Tim and Cass.” When Tim asked why he was bothering to talk about ethics with Jason again, Bruce just muttered something about wanting a less homicidal family and PowerPoints were how he coped. Weirdo.

“I’m literally being held hostage by your son,” Jason said into the camera. “This is my SOS. Call the League of Assassins and save me, Drake Dude. I’m being trafficked!”

Tim rolled his eyes. So dramatic. “No one’s going to save you, Jason. You’re already safe!”

Jack looked suddenly much less excited. “Tim, we’ve talked about boundaries. People need space. And consent. Lots of consent.”

“Jason isn’t ‘people,’ he’s hoard, so that rule doesn’t count,” Tim said confidently. “Humans don’t get rights when they belong to dragons.”

“Precisely,” Janet said.

“*No,* Janet, that not how it works.*”* Jack said, but *he* didn’t have a hoard, so his opinion was invalid. “Tim, listen to me—”

Tim was already hanging up.

“Okay, family time is over. Time to show you my Robin picture collection,” he said, and he started dragging Jason toward the stairs. “After that, the OG Robin appreciation shrine!”

“No, I’m serious, Tim, you need to let me go home,” Jason said, digging his heels in. “I’m *this* close to snapping—”

Tim ignored him. Jason was having a great time. He just liked to complain, which Tim didn’t mind. As long as Jason stayed here, it was paradise.

***

Trouble came to paradise that afternoon in the form of Steph. She marched into the house spitting proverbial fire, her hair a rat’s nest and her clothes filthy.

“You!” she yelled, pointing at Tim and Cass. They were sitting at the island, trying to figure out how to make French Toast. It was not going well.

“Us?” Tim said.

“Yes, you traitors!” Steph said. "We had a deal, Cass. You scare the Bats, and I film it for our future YouTube channel. Simple plan. *Not hard*. So why was the first thing I heard from Babs when I woke up an hour ago is that you already spilled the beans on Batdad!?”

Cass shrugged. "Change plan. Timing too good."

"It was the perfect moment," Tim agreed. "You should have seen their faces."

"I would have if you'd bothered to tell me you weren't *dead in a ditch."* Steph fumed. "I was up almost two days straight looking for you in Crime Alley, and *this* is the thanks I get? Nothing is sacred in this house, not even evil schemes. You two won't get any waffles for the next year!"

Tim and Cass gasped. A cruel punishment, indeed.

“Nobody even told me you were okay. I had to find out late, as usual,” Steph kept grumbling. "You never tell me anything. Next thing I know, there'll be ghosts and zombies running around because

you forgot to mention the apocalypse started. Your evil, two-faced presence is corrupting Bruce's house. You hear that, Tim? You’re a stain upon the world! An oil-based stain on white fabric!”

Cass leaned over the counter and patted Steph’s head. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you mad. Apology toast?”

Steph eyed the mutilated bread on the counter warily. Even Tim had to admit it was unappetizing. No wonder he and Cass were technically banned from the kitchen. Alfred was *not* going to be happy, especially since the salad spinner was ruined.

Jason chose that moment to round the corner. "Hey, Tim, do we have any more onion dip—”

He froze, looking at Steph in surprise and confusion. Tim doubted he recognized her as Spoiler. The same couldn't be said for her though, since Tim used to spend hours showing her his photo collection of the famously dead Robin, so Jason’s face was one she knew like the back of her hand.

“Zombie!” Steph screamed, and threw the toaster at his face.

***

"We need to work on your habit of forgetting to relay important information," Bruce said, gently taping a Wonder Woman Band-Aid onto Jason's face. Jason scowled and flipped him the bird, but he didn't take it off.

"You guys didn't tell her either," Tim said, kicking his feet in the air from his place on the cot. "I am hardly at fault."

"I don't care whose fault it was, I didn't come all the way back from the dead to be assaulted by kitchen appliances," Jason said. "You're lucky Steph is hilarious, or I would totally hold a grudge."

"She is a good human," Tim agreed. He wondered which of them would win a grudge match against each other. They were both equally stubborn.

Steph was currently upstairs fixing the toaster under Alfred's watchful eye, penance for her enthusiastic anti-zombie measures. Dick was filling her in on the whole magic green slime encounter and assassin gap year Jason had, as well as how Tim had dragged him home as soon as he'd discovered his identity.

Cass was still in the kitchen, trying to make toast. Tim expected the fire alarm to go off any minute.

“Speaking of who knows, did anyone tell Babs Jason is back yet?” Tim asked.

“Dick was the one who called her after Cass appeared,” Bruce frowned, starting to look worried. “I’m sure he mentioned it.”

Tim and Jason exchanged knowing looks.

“Bruce, when I was fourteen, Dick forgot that apples grew on trees,” Jason said. “He thought they were root vegetables for, like, a month.”

“He also forgot to tell the Titans I was a dragon,” Tim said. “And he thought mullets used to be hip.”

Dick also apparently thought “hip” was a good thing to be, and not dated at all. It explained a lot about his wardrobe.

“Hn,” Bruce said, now looking genuinely nervous.

Which he should be. None of the Waynes should have been the ones to tell Babs; they were all terrible communicators. Alfred should have called her.

When Babs found out, she was going to be pissed.

***

"'Everything is fine,' you said! 'You can call off the search,' you said! '*Nothing to worry about,' you said!"*

Dick sank deeper into his chair.

"I think *my surrogate, emotional support brother coming back from the dead* is something I should worry about, don't you think, *Richard*?"

Tim continued showing Cass how Babs' wheelchair worked, making sure she didn't put her fingers between the spokes on accident.

Jason was grinning like a madman.

"I'm sorry," Dick said. "I had a lot on my mind."

"*I* have a lot on my mind! How do you think I felt when you went dark yesterday? Don't you think I'd like to know about the zombification of Bruce's one decent child?"

"Hey, at least use the biblical allusion to Lazarus," Jason said. "That sounds way cooler than zombie."

"And Bruce has plenty of good kids!" Tim said, gesturing at Cass.

Babs shook her head. "No, you're monsters, all of you. Now get over here, Jason, so I can hug you properly."

Jason wheezed as Babs used her biceps from hell to crush the air out of his lungs, but didn't complain. Dick smiled fondly at the sight, his own peril forgotten.

“Don’t get comfortable, Boy Blunder,” Babs said. “You’re going to make this up to me in spades.”

Dick winced.

Well, mostly forgotten.

***

A week passed. Technically, Tim was supposed to be at school, but he’d called the nurse and told her he had a rare case of bubonic plague, so he was off the hook. Janet had verified it because she was an angel, and now Tim could focus 100% on his perfect, amazing hoard.

However, Jason was a problem.

“I mean it, Replacement, get off. I have a life of crime to get back to!” Jason scowled, halfway out the front door. “Tim, I mean it. Kevin still has my Emotional Support Bazooka. I need to get it back —*Tim!”*

Tim curled tighter around Jason and resolutely ignored him. Kevin could keep the darn gun for all he cared. Tim would buy Jason all the weaponry he’d ever need.

“A bazooka . . .” Bruce frowned. He’d been walking to the kitchen, newspaper in hand. “Jason Peter Todd, we’ve talked about Emotional Support Artillery.”

“No, *you* talked, I tuned you out because you’re *wrong.”*

“Jason died, he needs a security blanket,” Tim chirped. “Or a security gun, I guess. They make him feel safe.”

“Exactly. Thanks, Replacement,” Jason said, fluffing Tim’s hair. “And on that note, I need to unborrow said gun and go back to my life of crime—”

“Nope.”

Tim kept Jason pinned to the floor, slithering into a proper dragon shape so he couldn’t escape.

Bruce stood over them and started his Standard Morality Lecture about why Jason should stick to bat-approved vigilantism. Jason yelled back something in Latin about seizing the murder, then added some ancient philosopher mumbo jumbo about how Bruce was wrong.

Tim knew from experience that once they started fighting about murder they’d be going at it the entire afternoon, so he settled in and got comfortable.

It sounded like they were both having a lot of fun.

***

Tim was floating halfway between sleep and wakefulness. It was a fuzzy place to be, especially because someone was running a hand through his hair. He sighed and relaxed into it, not even attempting to battle his way to consciousness.

“You sure he’s actually fifteen and not, like, twelve?”

It was Jason’s voice, gruff and grumpy like always. Tim had a vague recollection of curling up next to him in the library, but everything after that was a blur.

“Yeah, we’re sure. Don’t let his cute act fool you, he’s in high school and everything,” Dick replied. Since when did Dick get here? Oh well, two hoard members in the same dream was just twice the awesomeness.

“Could’ve fooled me. He acts way younger.”

“B has a theory about that, actually. His guess is Tim is developing slower than a normal human. Not enough to be concerning, dragons have insanely long lifespans. Apparently, they don’t get full-size for decades too, so that’d explain why he’s so . . . well, *Tim,* about everything.”

“Wait, so he’s basically a dragon toddler?”

“Yeah, but don’t say that to his face. He’s very proud of being a juvenile. Apparently, most dragons don’t live that long, courtesy of their parents.”

Tim scrunched his nose, unsure if it was worth waking up all the way to remind Dick how awesome Janet was.

“Just remember that Tim’s worldview is completely nuts. Bruce and I can barely make heads or tails of it. He doesn’t understand humans that well, so it makes negotiating with him is . . . challenging. You have to go at it from an angle he understands, though that’s pretty difficult.”

Jason’s fingers curled a bit tighter in Tim’s hair. It felt *super* good. He purred lightly, sinking deeper into sleep.

“His angle? You don’t say . . . ” Jason said, sounding thoughtful.

Then Tim was gone.

***

Two days later, he was ambushed in the library by Jason.

“Timberlina, we need to talk,” he said, using his Red Hood voice.

Tim dog-eared the book he was reading and threw it onto the floor, all ears. Dick's diary was boring anyway; all he did was talk about his breakups.

Jason stared at the discarded book in horror. A vein pulsed in his temple, but he did some deep breathing and calmed down. His self-control was so good, even with all that Lazarus water messing with his brain. Tim would have to send Talia a thank-you fruit basket for those anger management classes.

"Tim, I know you're *really* attached to me, but I can't stay here," Jason said, sitting on the couch by Tim. "You need to let me go back to Gotham."

"Why? This is your home," Tim said. "Everybody loves you. You have to stay."

Bruce was looking lighter than he had in years, even though all Jason did was yell at him. Dick was still breaking down in tears about his baby brother being home, and Cass loved getting piggybacks from Jason. Leaving all of that didn't make sense. No way was the Emotional Support Bazooka *that* epic.

Or was it?

"Love isn't the problem," Jason scowled. "Look, Tim, I *cannot* stay in the same house as Bruce. It's . . . a territory issue."

A what now.

"Dick mentioned you and your mom can't stand being near each other, right? Well, it's the same with me and Bruce. I need a place to metaphorically spread my wings. I'm at the age where I need to be independent and leave the nest. You understand, right?"

Oh, Tim did. This all made so much more sense now. This was just like when Dick became Nightwing, except there was a lot more murder and bombs involved. Trust Jason to never do things by halves.

“I know you don’t like your hoard being far away, but I need my space, ‘kay, Timbuktu? I may not be Virginia Woolf, but I need a room of my own to survive in this crazy, crazy world.”

Tim sensed that if this conversation went on much longer Jason would start peppering in more literary references. Good thing he understood what needed to be done.

“Don’t worry, Jason, I get it,” he said. “Parents are tricky. Either they smother you or try to kill you. There’s no happy in-between.”

Jason opened his mouth, then shut it again, looking mulish because Tim was right. (Bruce vs. Sheila, anyone?)

Cass had been in a similar position, except Cain had been both smothering and murderous. Still, once she’d left, she still wanted a good parent to look after her. Tim suspected it was so she could be a kid for the first time ever. Clearly, Jason was happy to leave his childhood in the dust, and that was understandable.

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? I never would have forced you to stay if you’d just been better at communicating,” Tim sighed.

“What do you think I’ve been yelling about nonstop since you brought me here, Tim?” Jason asked dryly.

Tim squinted. This sounded like a trick question. All he remembered was “yell yell murder” and “you’re not my dad.” Neither of those things screamed territory dispute.

“Whatever, I’ll take my wins where I can get them,” Jason grumbled. “I’ll drop by now and then to visit, Timborino, so don’t freak out. I won’t be far from your nest.”

Jason fondly nudged a stack of Penguin Classics that were piled near the couch. All of them had a “Property of Tim” sticker on the cover, even though he’d never read any of them. They were his though, and therefore precious. They also made great fire starters.

Tim jumped up and gave Jason a hug, making sure he smelled like the rest of the manor so no other dragons got ideas. “You better take care of yourself, Jason. I don’t want you to die again.”

“Don’t worry, Timbit, I don’t plan to push any more daisies. It gets old fast.”

Good. Reviving people seemed like a messy business, and finding a Lazarus Pit sounded just as tricky.

“So, no more stopping me from leaving?” Jason said hopefully.

“Nope.” Tim grinned.

Jason didn’t want to be near Bruce. That was fine, even though Tim loathed him leaving the Manor.

But it was okay, because there was an easy solution.

He just needed a bigger nest.

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, in the woods by Wayne Manor.

Talia *sets down their binoculars*: That went better than I anticipated. Hardly any blood at all.
Beta Assassin: Yeah, I guess those anger management lessons worked after all. (Surprising.)
Talia: Indeed. And, if my Beloved can welcome one murderous assassin child back into the fold, then I am sure there is room for another. My son's arrival will go much smoother than expected.
Beta Assassin: Yeah, that's nice—wait, your what now?
Talia: Come Carl, there is much to prepare.
Beta Assasin: No, wait, back up to the child —LADY TALIA, COME BACK, I NEED ANSWERS!

🐉End of part 2. 🐉

How to Scare Your Dragon

Chapter Summary

Tim attempts family bonding.

Jack intervenes.

Chapter Notes

Guys guys nothing bad has happened since I last posted!

(Aside from the mouse in my apartment, but aren't we all rodents scavenging to meek out a banal existence at the end of the day?)

Life is good!

Another shoutout to RavenGranger for the awesome beta and chapter title! 🥳

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim was having a great day.

His hoard was happy, Jason was alive, and it was Thanksgiving break, so he was free from the clutches of Human Child Jail.

The last couple of weeks had been bliss. If this were a children's movie, Tim knew the credits would be rolling as the words Happily Ever After popped up on the screen.

Jason was still rebelling against his family, but stopped by a couple times a week for movies, food, and his regular arguments with Bruce. They were in a war of attrition to change each other's minds about murder. It reminded Tim of his parents attempting to convert each other to their preferred love language, only with a lot more shouting.

Well, Jason shouted. Bruce just grunted and occasionally went for the spray bottle.

“For the last time, old man, stop trying to Pavlov me into being nonlethal!” Jason sputtered. “It didn’t work on Tim, and it won’t work on me.”

Bruce grumbled an apology as he put the spray bottle down. Served him right; this was the one time Bruce shot first and asked questions later. Tim hoped he thought long and hard about his life choices.

“Actually, Tim’s been very well behaved,” Dick said from the couch. He’d poured milk into a bowl of popcorn to munch on while he watched Gilmore Girls. “There’ve been a few close calls, but he hasn’t killed anybody.”

Tim smiled. “Yeah, I have great self-control.”

Bruce gave him a small smile. “That’s right, champ. We’re proud of your restraint.”

Jason looked at everyone in disbelief. He had the same pinched expression Dick and Bruce used to get when Tim talked about his parents. “Restraint? You think he has restraint?”

Memories of a lovely hour spend brutally murdering a man together rolled through Tim’s head, but he didn’t let it show on his face. Instead, he pulled out his best Innocent™ expression and curled next to Dick, purring lightly.

“He can be a *bit* violent,” Dick said, throwing his arm around him, “but we’re working on it. It’s part of his How To Be Human classes, which I think you’d benefit from too.”

There was either horror or respect in Jason’s eyes, Tim couldn’t tell.

“Right,” the teenage crime lord said. “Well, this has been officially disturbing.”

He turned and left, shaking his head and muttering about luring Cass down from the attic. Dick had installed a Wii and beanbag for her and she hadn't been seen in three days.

Dick turned up the volume on his TV show as Jason vanished. "What do you think that was about?"

"No idea," Tim lied. "Got any popcorn left?"

Dick handed him the bowl. Tim waited until Dick was distracted by the screen to sprinkle umami into it, then started drinking the milk.

So far, nobody suspected the Joker was dead. It was really convenient for Tim. He could already imagine the lectures if that crime got back to him. Although . . . weirdly, no Arkham breakouts had been reported. Like, at all. The Waynes didn't even know Joker was MIA from his cell.

Odd.

Tim would have to look into that at some point. It probably wasn't good if the state-of-the-art prison wasn't reporting breakouts.

But that was Future Tim's project. Present Tim was way too busy to add that to his plate, because claiming Gotham as his territory was a lot of work.

***

Dragons chose their territory carefully. It was a pretty big deal to stake a claim, after all. Tim didn't need to waste time thinking about it though; he already had all the facts he needed.

Jason didn't want to live in the manor? That was fine, Tim could respect that. Even humans got tired of endless smothering via paternal units. In fact, Tim loved pointing that out to Jack during their FaceTimes to remind him that he was *way* too into this family thing.

But just because Jason got space from Bruce didn't mean he got space from Tim. Not by a long shot.

So far, claiming the city was going smoothly. The Bats weren't even trying to stop him. Tim felt fuzzy knowing he had their blessing for this venture.

Well, blessing was a stretch. Dick had actually said, "At this point I'm too tired to care. As long as you're not eating anyone, it'll be fine," but Tim considered that good enough.

He purred just thinking about it; a city, all to himself! Developmentally, he should have been wandering different biospheres looking for the perfect place to stake his claim, but Tim was nothing if not a prodigy. He'd do his dragon heritage proud, and he wouldn't even need to move his nest to do it.

Tim had already begun scenting landmarks and leaving strung-up bones and shiny things everywhere. Anything with a decent nose could tell that a dragon was taking advantage of the free real estate now, and they'd have to be blind not to notice his avant-garde territory markers.

He could do without the Reddit threads comparing the Robin shrines to Tim's glorious masterpieces though. They were completely different types of installation art. Heathens.

Good thing he was also making more obvious gestures so the humans would clue in too.

"What are you doing?" Steph asked when she stumbled across him one night.

Tim grinned. "What I was born to do!"

He turned back to the billboard and continued spray painting the Robin symbol on it with red paint. He'd already left claw marks over the picture of Lex Luthor's face, but now humans would also get the memo. Tim's city, no touchy.

"That tells me nothing," Steph said. "Isn't graffiti too tame for you? You usually default to arson."

Tim smiled. Arson was his favorite. “Not this time. I need this to last longer than a gas fire.”

She eyed the billboard. “That makes sense, I guess, but the fact you’re doing normal-ish vandalism seems more off the wall than your usual stunts. Is this reverse psychology? Are you starting to level up in insanity?”

“No, it isn’t, and you like insanity,” Tim reminded her. “Sometimes you just gotta spray paint an afro on a megalomaniac’s head.”

“Touche,” she said as she grabbed the spare can of spray paint. “Can I help?”

“Sure! I saved the other side for you. Anyway, I’m not more insane, I’m just more comfortable being me. The only thing I’ve embraced is myself.”

Tim felt more comfortable in his skin than he ever had. He didn’t need to hide his dragon side around his hoard, and now that Jason was back, Tim felt *whole* for the first time in years. That was reason enough to discard some of the human masking he’d forced himself to do his whole life.

Steph looked from him to the defaced billboard. “I support that, but I still have questions.”

“It’s a symbol of my affection to all of you.” Tim rolled his eyes. One of these days he’d hoard a human who didn’t need explanations for everything and just accepted the fact that Tim operated on another level of genius.

Oh, wait, he already had. It was Bart.

“Thanks, I guess,” Steph said. “It *is* pretty fun to do some light-hearted crime. Batman has such a stick up his butt about following the law most of the time. I’m glad you’re more flexible.”

“Thank you,” Tim said. He always appreciated it when his hoard was on the same wavelength as him.

They stood back to admire their work. Tim wondered if he should have set part of it on fire.

“Want to get waffles?” Steph said. “Committing vandalism always makes me hungry.”

“Same,” Tim said.

They grappled toward Crime Alley, chattering about different syrup brands. Tim made sure to comm Cass in case she wanted to join, but she and Bruce were brutally subduing a gang shootout at the docks. Tim decided to leave them to their bonding activity.

He suspected none of his humans really understood what claiming a territory meant. A lot of things got lost in translation, and they mostly compared it to how gangs divided the streets.

He shook his head fondly. For all their detective brains, they missed a lot of important things. Territory mattered because it meant Hoard was nearby, and Hoard mattered more than the air Tim breathed. Letting other dragons know he was here was Tim’s declaration that he was strong enough to protect his treasures, and anything that tried to take them from him would die a painful, prolonged death.

Janet was going to be so proud when she found out what he was up to. Tim was insanely young to claim an area for himself, and he wouldn’t have if he wasn’t confident that he could take on a full-grown dragon and win. All those skirmishes with her growing up were great combat experience.

. . . Although Janet raised a problem. A big, unavoidable one.

His mom didn’t have a dedicated territory anymore. She and Jack were so nomadic that it was impossible to keep her claim fresh. However, the rest of her hoard was another matter, and it was currently sitting in Tim’s childhood home.

Right next to his main nest.

Tim settled into a booth at Waffle House with Steph, ignoring the civilians filming them for TikTok. Steph chatted about her visit to the Watchtower last month and how Babs was initiating Cass into the Birds of Prey, but Tim only half paid attention.

His mind kept wandering to that annoying, unclaimed spot where Drake Manor was. It was the one place he couldn't snatch up on his own.

He tapped his fingers against the table and hummed. He'd just had his molt and felt more powerful than ever.

He could totally take on Janet right now. Easy.

***

When Tim called his parents that week, he made sure to aggressively challenge Janet to a duel to the death, dragon style, in order to rip Drake Manor from her cold, dead hands.

Jack was not happy when he figured out their increasingly shrill shrieks at each other weren't the happy greetings they claimed them to be. He'd been brushing up on his Draconic, so even though he didn't understand a word they were saying, he picked up on the tone. Dangit, was nothing sacred? This was cultural appropriation!

Jack called Bruce into the room with an emergency code they'd apparently brainstormed for Dragon Problems, and Tim and Janet's bonding activity was killed in its cradle.

"You always want us to spend time together. Stop being so unfair!" Tim said.

"Indeed. This is hardly supportive," Janet said. "Our son is finally growing into a proper dragon, and this is your reaction? I'm insulted."

"You're planning to kill each other again!" Jack defended. "Of course I'm upset!"

Janet and Tim traded affronted looks. *Humans*. Most dragons didn't start defending territory until they'd grown big enough to fight off adult dragons. Tim was skipping several decades of development to make the best nest for his hoard; it figured that nobody appreciated that.

"Janet rarely comes to Gotham. I'm sure you can avoid confronting each other, even if there is an overlap," Bruce said diplomatically. "Drake Manor can be neutral ground."

"That's not good enough. I want it all," Tim said.

Janet was in agreement. Dragons didn't share. Sharing was the *opposite* of hoarding; it wasn't rocket science.

"You'll have the rest of the city. Please stop conspiring to kill each other," Jack said.

"Did you even hear what I said? All means *all.* And we're not conspiring," Tim frowned.

"Subterfuge would require a degree of secrecy," Janet said.

"No death matches," Jack said sternly. "Drake Manor is my house, not yours or Janet's. You'll leave it *out* of your territory dispute."

"That's not fair!" Tim said. "Property deeds are social constructs. Hoard is forever."

Didn't Jack know that dragons automatically owned everything their hoard did? What had Janet even been teaching him these last 20 years?

"They are not constructs, Tim," Bruce said long-sufferingly. "You can't pretend everything that inconveniences you doesn't exist."

Tim *could,* thank you very much. He was great at it.

“You can hoard everyone you love just fine without turning my home into an ash mound,” Jack said. “I will be very upset if you kill each other. In fact, the grief would destroy me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Janet said. “You would be fine.”

“Yeah, Dad, you’re not fooling anyone,” Tim said. “Humans don’t mate for life, you’ll bounce back if we kick the bucket. TV told me so.”

Dragons almost never found a mate, but when they did, they committed 300% to them forever. Humans were different. Dick’s evil reality shows taught him that. Tim and Janet had made a contingency plan to yeet Jack at either a bachelor show or an orphanage if one of them died, that way he could stay happy.

It was a foolproof plan.

“I’m not like the TV humans. I would rather die than lose either of you,” Jack said. “So, unless you want to see me upset, you’ll content yourself with hoarding the rest of the city and not my ancestral home. Capiche?”

No, there was no capiche. What did he mean by TV humans? Were they a different subspecies of normal humans? That would explain why supermodels all looked the same, aside from the unrealistic beauty standards and spray tans forced on them.

“You are being illogical, darling. This is simply how nature works,” Janet said. “You should be proud of Timothy’s initiative. Most dragons don’t create their own domain until they’ve shed their juvenile scales.”

That took a good twenty to thirty years, so Tim was definitely ahead of the curve.

Jack looked between his wife and son, then sighed. “I didn’t want to do this, but you leave me no choice.”

And then he sniffled.

Tim felt his stomach drop to the soles of his feet.

Back when Dick forced him to watch *The Princess Bride*, there was a scene with the sound of pure agony, and that was how Tim felt listening to his dad start to cry. Nope, nope nope nope.

“Stop it, Dad, you’re not fooling anyone,” he said. “Those aren’t real tears.”

“Indeed, this is most unbecoming,” Janet said.

Both of them fidgeted, visibly uncomfortable, but they had to stay strong. Jack wasn’t *really* upset. He was just confused about who was supposed to worry about who in the family. Tim and Janet looked after him, he just needed to be happy, this was fine—

“I’m going to die of old age all alone because my wife and son murdered each other over who gets to micromanage *Gotham*,” Jack said, wiping a tear out of his eye. “I’ll never find love again. I’ll die of heartbreak. Life is empty and meaningless.”

“Dad, that’s not funny!” Tim said. “Stop crying!”

Jack continued to sniffle, ignoring Tim and Janet completely. Both dragons visibly cringed and started looking for exits.

Meanwhile, Bruce was glancing between the three Drakes like he’d just entered the Twilight Zone.

“If I die, I at least want to know my family is safe and happy,” Jack said. “Can you promise that for me, dears? It’s my dying wish. You wouldn’t deny me my dying wish.”

“You are not dying,” Janet said worriedly. “That is unacceptable. I won’t allow it.”

Tim nodded, wringing his hands. Jack *promised* not to die until he was 127, that was the deal. He couldn't back out now. That would be bad business practice—

"Oh no," Jack said in monotone. "My right arm aches."

Tim stood up and screamed, "Mom, get him to the hospital, it's a stroke!"

Janet yanked Jack to his feet and hauled him to the window.

"No transforming, no transforming—" Jack said.

"It's an emergency!" Tim said, frantically Googling what version of 911 he had to dial for that side of the world. "Identities don't matter in an emergency!"

"Tim, Mrs. Drake, he's faking, calm down—" Bruce said, but Tim tuned him out like a pro and Janet jumped out the window, Jack in tow.

***

In the end, Janet flew Jack in record speed to the nearest hospital and raised hell until someone looked over her mate. Luckily, Jack was fine. He got a full check-up from a very confused doctor who wanted to know how they got into his office, and he promised to give the staff who survived Janet's Karen impression a hefty tip. It turned out there wasn't anything wrong with his insides; he was as healthy as a horse. No risk of heart failure at all.

Tim and Janet could sigh with relief knowing their human was safe, but it was still a scare. Tim would be riding this adrenaline high for days.

"Just know my heart *will* fail if anything happens to either of you," Jack said when they were all back on the video call hours later. "And Janet, you need to be more careful with your shifting. Someone might have seen you."

People *had* actually spotted her. There were a dozen grainy videos of a green danger noodle dive-bombing a hospital circulating online, but Oracle was already taking them down. Tim wasn't worried about anyone finding out about his mom's identity though; Jack and Janet's dig site had been 60 miles away, and they'd used fake names at the hospital. Jack was overreacting, as usual.

"As if I care what other humans think of me," Janet scowled. "How dare you take us for fools, Jack. You will never do that again."

Oh, she wasn't calling him darling. Tim foresaw many a cold shoulder and some arguments about hoard behavior in the future.

"I promise not to as long as you two don't fight for Gotham," Jack said calmly. "Who knows, perhaps the next one will be a real heart attack?"

"You're evil," Tim said. How did he not see this before? Jack was *devious.* "Sly, manipulative, and unfair!"

Jack pretended to be all nice and mellow, and then he pulled something this. Bad hoard member! Health scares were not cool.

"Where did you think you got it?" Jack said, raising an eyebrow.

Tim snapped his mouth shut and glowered. He hated that Jack had a point. For all her awesomeness, Janet wasn't subtle. If she wanted something, she just took it, no manipulation required. Jack had to be clever to get his way, and Tim felt offended to know he'd never noticed it until now.

"*Evil,"* he repeated, then ended the call.

Now he was *never* going to have a showdown with his mom. There would be that one, annoying, *not-his* part of Gotham right in the corner of his eyes, and he couldn't even raze it to the ground because Jack would cry again. Or worse, get sneaky like he had today.

“I hate it when Dad uses his brain,” Tim grumbled. “Don’t *you* get any ideas, B. I won’t fall for it from anyone else.”

Bruce put his hands up in surrender. He’d stayed with Tim the entire time Janet had taken Jack to the hospital, arm curled around Tim’s shoulder as he offered stoic, awkward comfort. “Of course not, chum.”

But he looked *way* too calculating. Letting him see Jack’s ultimate technique was a mistake.

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, in Arkham.

Security Guard: Are you sure you don’t want us to report that the mass-murdering psycho got out, boss?
Head of Arkham Asylum: Am I happy he escaped? No. Do I want to look Batman in the eye when he inevitably visits and tell him the revolving door is up and running again? Also no. I want to live.
SG: I don’t think being scared of Batman is a good excuse.
Head: Then YOU fess up.
SG: …OK, I see your point. We’re screwed either way. Joker is Schrödinger’s cat now.

Hello, Bart, My Old Friend (I'm Here To Cause Chaos With You Again)

Chapter Summary

Tim: I'm behaved. I'm nice. I can come with you to the Watchtower.

Bruce, a naive fool: You're right.

Chapter Notes

I woke in a cold sweat at 3 AM and realized I forgot to post Tim and Bart's reunion. Apologies to everyone. Chapter 31 (Mario Kart and Murder Bros) is now chapter 32 and has been updated slightly, along with a new "Meanwhile, in Arkham" end note. Sorry for the confusion, but on the bright side, here's another chapter! 😅

Vote in the comments for what snack I buy RavenGranger as a thank you for betaing 3 CHAPTERS IN 3 DAYS. She's superwoman and deserves the world. Sadly, I can't provide that, but I can get her food.

1) fruit snacks
2) popcorn and milk
3) apples
4) Halloween candy
5) ice cream

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At this point, Tim was going to need to make a PowerPoint explaining why matricide was an amazing draconic cultural custom and should be respected. Same with filicide, fratricide, infanticide, familicide, prolicide, and all the other -cides. Digital slideshows were the only language Bruce understood, and doggone it, Tim would *make* him understand.

Eventually. Just not today. Today, Tim had wonderful plans.

Everything in Gotham (aside from not murdering Janet) was going great. Jason was back, Cass had started her first day of professional speech therapy, Dick was back at work in Blüdhaven, and Bruce had finally had more than six consecutive hours of sleep for the first time since Red Hood showed up. But more than that, it was also the JLA's semi-annual Founders Conference, and Bruce agreed to let Tim come with him to the Watchtower as long as he behaved.

Tim was vibrating with excitement. Finally, trust! It wouldn't be long before he had unrestricted access to all JLA compounds. Maybe even Titans Tower too, though it'd be tough to convince Dick.

He beamed as they appeared in the zeta tube in the space station and followed Bruce down the hall with a skip in his step. The engineered gravity felt funky. It was so *weird.*

League Members gave stoic nods to Batman as they passed. Those who'd been at the Protégé Day party got really wide eyes when they saw Tim and hastily backed away.

"Is Beast Boy in today?" Tim asked Bruce.

"He is a Titan. He doesn't normally come here."

Which was probably why Bruce agreed for Tim to be here in the first place. Bummer. Dick was way too protective of Gar.

Bruce was unamused when Tim said that aloud. "You tried to maul him."

"But I didn't!" Tim said. He'd only gotten a mouthful of scrumptious blood, which wasn't nearly enough. He'd cut off his left hand it if meant getting a full-course meal that delicious.

Speaking of which. . .

"Do you think Beast Boy can regrow limbs? He has lizard DNA in there. I bet he could. Do you think if I asked he'd—"

"No."

“B!” Tim pouted. Humans had tons of limbs. Even a normal one could function just fine without a couple. “It’d just be for my enrichment.”

“No.”

Apparently, even Bambi eyes weren’t strong enough to make Bruce budge on this. Rats, B’s permission had been Tim’s only hope. Dick was too good at saying no to him to ever agree.

Oh well, the chance to taste the most delicious snack in the world again would have been great, but that wasn’t why Tim was excited. No, today was amazing and wonderful because—

They entered the main conference room, and a red blur immediately tackled Tim. It knocked him back ten feet and body-slammed him into the ground.

“Robin!” Bart said. He pinned Tim’s arms to the floor and grinned wildly, babbling super fast into Tim’s ear and pressing on top of him like a suction cup. “You’re back, you’re finally back! I haven’t seen you in *forever!”*

“Impulse!” Tim beamed, trying to get free so he could catch the bright static lights Impulse emitted. “I missed you!”

“I missed you more. You’re my favorite person *ever,* it’s not fair you had to stay away!”

“I guarantee my feelings are stronger.” Dragons went all in with emotions. Tim would take a bullet for Bart at the drop of a hat.

“Did you finally teach Batman a lesson? Can we hang out more now? Please please please please say yes. Kid Flash is extra annoying and Grandpa is always busy and Max makes me do *chores*—”

“We can hang out. I have so much to tell you.”

His new murder bro, Cass's adoption papers finalized, Tim's latest rock haul from Gotham's annual gem show . . . So much had happened, but now that all his ducks were in a row, Tim could finally spend time with his favorite speedster.

Bart squealed and gave Tim a hug. Tim returned it happily, making sure to nuzzle him for enrichment purposes. He smelled like laundry detergent, airports, and electricity.

"I've missed you so much, it's been forever. I thought I was going to die from not seeing you!" Bart said, pulling them upright. He rocked on his heels and kept hugging Tim. "I have awesome school friends and Max said it's good to meet new people but none of them are dragons and they don't *get* me, and and and—"

"Wow, do the words PDA mean nothing in these sacred halls?" Hal Jordan said, edging past them. "Get a room, kids."

Tim hissed at him and hugged his speedster tighter. One did not simply mock Bart. Impulse was allowed to be as clingy as he wanted in public.

"Ok, calm down, freaky lizard child," Hal said, looking much more nervous. "Nice dragon, don't maim me."

Tim was tempted to on principle. Bruce was always complaining about Hal. He wouldn't mind if he nipped at him a bit.

"Robin, no," B said as he pulled out his notes for the JLA meeting. "We talked about this. Don't worry, Jordan, he's all bite, no bark."

Wow, how did he know what Tim was planning? Was he a mind-reader now?

"That's not nearly as comforting as you think, Bats," Green Lantern said. He sat in the corner, far away from Tim.

“Don’t sweat it, Green,” Flash said, zipping into his own seat. “Batman has a handle of his partner. Right, Bats?”

Bruce grunted that he did. You know, like a liar.

“By the way, how’s Gotham?” Flash continued. “I heard there’s been some shenanigans there lately.”

“It’s under control,” Bruce said.

Tim glanced up from where Bart was recounting his Super Mario Bros 2 speedrun. “Yeah, it was awesome. Explosions, murders, decapitations, The works! Red Hood is such a good rogue! Proud dragon moment for me. He even left me snacks!”

Jason was such a homie. A true murder bro. He was *destined* to be in Tim’s hoard.

“That’s . . . nice,” Superman said as he went over the meeting agenda. “Good thing you guys caught him.”

“Yeah, he comes to Sunday dinner each week,” Tim said. “It’s great. He’s my role model for all things human.”

The way everyone double-taked was pretty hilarious. Bruce just sighed louder.

“Red Hood is my zombified son brought back from the dead with rage-induced psychosis. It’s not relevant to the meeting,” he said. “Robin, I believe you have places to be?”

“Oh, right,” Tim said as Bruce motioned for Tim to get gone. Tim had just come up here to a) show the league he could behave, and b) meet up with Impulse before heading down to Mount Justice.

“What do you mean *not relevant?*” Green Lantern demanded. “I don’t care about reviewing JLA policies, why the hell didn’t you mention this at our last meeting? Give me the tea!”

“It’s under control. I made him a PowerPoint.”

“What does that *mean?!”*

Bruce “hrned” and ignored him. The rest of the JLA started demanding an explanation as well, which meant it was time for Tim to exit stage left. Nothing rotted his brain more than a recap.

Luckily, Bart was of the same mind. He yanked Tim to his feet and started talking about the latest adventures he’d had with the Young Justice team. Tim had missed a lot, apparently, like a cult using Teletubbies to take over the world and a de-aging spell that turned Young Justice into millennials with existential dread. Shame. Good thing he at least gotten a Jason out of it.

“Bye, B, stay safe,” Tim waved. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Follow the rules,” Bruce replied. Ugh, stick in the mud.

Bart dragged Tim back to the zetas as Bruce tiredly got out his “Jason Todd, alive and well!” PowerPoint. Then they were off for another grand adventure with fellow teens. Tonight could not get better.

***

Mount Justice was a lot different than Tim remembered. It’d turned from a glorified storage space for JLA equipment into a clubhouse of cool hero gadgets. Someone had installed a set of speakers near the power bank, and there was a mini fridge full of Monster drinks.

It was also trashed. Teenagers weren’t known for their cleanliness. Luckily, it had nothing on Gotham’s level of filth, so Tim felt right at home.

“Oh, it’s you guys,” Kon said, sprawled across the couch. “Great.”

“You sound less than excited about that,” Tim said. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. I’m on top of the world,” Kon said, face down in the cushions like he wanted to smother himself.

Tim and Bart raised their eyebrows in sync. Neither were the best at social cues, but Tim had a feeling Kon was lying through his teeth.

Wonder Girl peeked in the room and rolled her eyes. “You’re still here, Kon? Come on, you’ll be fine. Oh, hey, chaos twins.”

“Hi, Cassie,” Bart said. “What’s wrong with Kon? Is he sick or hurt or something because he’s acting weird—“

She blinked slowly. Tim put his hand over Bart’s mouth so she could answer.

“Kon is moping,” she said. “He’s sad he didn’t get invited to girl’s night with me and the others.”

Kon threw a pillow at her. “It’s discrimination! I’m the only guy on the team—“ which, rude, Bart and Tim were *right* there. “—just pretend I’m a woman for a few hours, I promise you won’t even notice!”

“Pass,” Cassie said. “Cissie is going through some stuff, Anita is on another voodoo kick, and Greta is *Greta*. I have my hands full holding the brain cell without you there to complicate things.”

Bart rested his chin on Tim’s shoulder and whispered, “What happens during girls’ night?”

“Arson,” Tim replied. “Also waffle making and reverse mugging.”

At least, that’s what Steph said, and Steph was a reliable source of teenage wisdom.

Bart nodded in understanding.

“But you can’t just leave me here!” Kon cried. “I’m a social butterfly. Don’t put me back in a cocoon!”

He looked wretched. Extroverts, poor souls. Tim couldn’t imagine a worse existence.

Cassie looked both sympathetic and tempted to punt Kon into the sun, then she glanced at Tim and Bart and got a glint of an idea in her eye. “Don’t worry, Superboy, you’ll be fine. You can have a boys’ night with these two.”

Kon scrambled off the couch. “No, you can’t be serious—“

“Sure, I can. You’re always complaining there aren’t more guys for you to chill with,” Cassie said. “Well, wish granted.”

“Don’t treat my teenage dreams like a monkey’s paw, you know that’s not what I meant!”

But it was too late. Tim was fully on board with this plan. After all, he liked Kon. Kon was cool and had fun jewelry that Tim wanted to steal. Maybe today he’d finally get to.

“Don’t worry, Cassie, we’ll take great care of him,” Tim said brightly. He and Bart linked their arms with Kon and put on calm, pleasant smiles. “Have fun vandalizing IHOPs and setting fire to municipal buildings.”

“Sure thing, although we were just planning to paint our nails and watch K-dramas. Thanks, Rob,” Cassie grinned. She waltzed out. A few seconds later they all heard the zeta tube activate as she left the mountain.

“Traitor,” Kon grumbled. “See if I vote you team leader, Girl wonder.”

“If they were watching K-dramas, you got off lucky,” Tim said, patting him on the shoulder. “Those things have romance and *kissing*. Absolutely disgusting. You’re much better off with us.”

“Yeah!” Bart said. “We’re going to have *so* much fun.”

He started talking really fast about a thief called White Lightning he wanted to catch who had an insane mullet wig thing going on, then got sidetracked talking about alligator wrangling techniques and how they could be used on Max.

“Maybe we can catch White Lightning together?” Tim said. “It’d be a bonding experience for the three of us!”

The rest of Young Justice was still warming up to Tim. They didn’t understand his genius yet. But they would. Oh, they would, starting with Kon.

“We totally should!” Bart said. “We’ll be the Terrible Trio, and afterward we can go to Milo’s for snacks and light some fireworks and—”

“Actually, I was going to binge Netflix—” Kon said, but Tim laughed and shook his head.

Extroverts needed stimulation, not Netflix. Dick was always *very* clear about that. And what better stimulation was there than running highspeed through bayous and swampland? None, that’s what.

All it took was judo flipping Kon into the zeta tube and threatening to hack his Hulu account, and suddenly Superboy was on board. Reluctantly on board, but on board all the same.

“Sometimes I can’t believe you’re on the side of the heroes,” Kon sighed as he got to his feet. They were now in Manchester, and the night sky screamed with crickets and bugs. Tim’s suit was already sticking to him unpleasantly. Humidity was evil.

Tim grinned. “Morality is relative. I’m just here to emotionally support Batman. Now come on, stop whining, resistance is futile.”

“Don’t I know it,” Kon said as Bart and Tim dragged him toward the bayou.

He *could’ve* used his TTK to fly away, so the fact that he didn’t meant that he didn’t mind hanging out at all, which Tim counted as an absolute win.

Now . . . how to steal Kon’s earring without him noticing . . .

Chapter End Notes

Reverse mugging = Tim and Steph beating up purse snatchers and stealing THEIR money while saying "what's in your wallet?"

Tim is missing a lot of YJ shenanigans, but that's more so I'm not getting lost in the sauce of YJ, Batman, and every other fandom out there. Tim's adventures with them will be mostly original stories that reference or borrow parts of the comics (nothing kills creativity faster than doing a line by line retelling of a story, trust me. Borrowing is more fun ^-^)

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

Security Guard: I’m just saying, we could at least let the janitor mop the room—
Head of Arkham: Too risky.
Security: I know there’s blood on the floor, but Gary won’t care. He’s got OCD, it doesn’t matter whose blood it is, he’ll clean it up without asking any questions.
Arkham Head: No, nobody is entering that room ever again! I’ll seal it like the cask of Amontillado myself if I have to.
Security guys *sigh*: Fine, but bribing me with the meals we’re supposed to feed Joker is only going to work for so long.
Arkham Head: …How do you feel about a few extra vacation days this year?
Security Guard: With PTO?
Arkham Head: *sigh* Yes. With PTO. Are you satisfied?
Security Guard: For now. Want me to get you some bricks?

Of Mario Kart and Murder Bros

Chapter Summary

Tim spends time with his hoard. 😇

Dick intervenes.

Chapter Notes

YES IT'S ME, DIO! I bring you another chapter. Enjoy, heathens.

Also did I ever mention the fact that my alarm is Theoden from LOTR screaming "The horn of Hal Hammerhand will sound . . . ONE LAST TIME!"Because lemme tell you, waking up to a war cry and suicide run is the best motivator I've found to getting through the semester. College is my Helm's Deep, I swear.

Anyway, thank you for betaing again, Ravengranger! Especially on such short notice 😁

UPDATE: 10/7/23

I accidentally posted ch 31 and ch 32 out of order. It's been fixed now, but if you read this while it was chapter 31 go back to catch the scenes you missed. There have also been some tweaks to this chapter as a consequence, along with the end notes being shuffled around.

Sorry for all the confusion!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim wanted to kick his past self. Isolating himself from his long-distance hoard during Red Hood's crime spree had sounded like a good idea at the time, but Tim was now Bart-deprived. Letting his irritation at Batman get in the way of proper Hoard Time was a mistake that Tim wouldn't repeat.

For that reason, Tim was mandating extra Bart time all week so they could catch up properly. Hanging out with Young Justice was awesome, but there were some things Tim wasn't allowed to talk about around the other heroes, plus he and Bart were still doing their gaslighting thing. (Nobody had figured out he wasn't human yet; it was kind of hilarious.)

Max still wasn't letting Tim go to Manchester again after he, Kon, and Bart stole $500 worth of fireworks and aimed the rockets at Bart's school, so they went to Gotham instead.

“It’s not hero work, so it doesn’t count,” Tim argued with flawless logic.

“You don’t even have proof I’m a meta,” Bart had added. “I just run on energy drinks! I’m not breaking any rules, so you can’t kick me out.”

Bruce had looked at them, shrugged, and went to do Bruce things somewhere else. Infiltration successful!

Now Bart, Tim, and Cass were squished onto the beanbag in the attic as they played Mario Kart. Steph would have come, but she was spending the day with Babs instead. Tim used this time to catch Bart up on the latest Hoard drama.

“Dad is literally the devil,” Tim said as he chucked a red shell at one of the NPCs and purposefully smacked into them as he drove his lil Yoshi dude past. “I totally could have taken Mom. He’s being speciesist!”

“I dunno, I think he had a point,” Bart said, dodging a banana peel. “Wouldn’t you be sad if your mom died?”

Tim tried to picture life after besting Janet in mortal combat. The image wouldn’t compute, so he shrugged and concentrated on finishing his second lap of Toad’s Factory. “No? It’s survival of the fittest. It’s weird we *haven’t* eaten each other yet.”

“I wonder how dragons taste,” Bart mused. He was playing both as Princess Peach and Rosalina, one controller per hand, and laughed whenever one of them fell off a cliff.

“Really good,” Tim said, remembering all the times he’d bitten Janet as a child. “Very salty.”

But not spicy, sadly. Fire didn’t equal jalapeños on the taste buds.

“No cannibalism,” Cass said as her Dry Bones crossed the finish line. “Bruce will be sad. Make the frowny face of doom.”

Tim hunched deeper into the beanbag. He didn’t like the frowny face. It was evil and made Tim feel guilt, which was an unnatural emotion that didn’t belong in his body.

“Don’t tell him?” Tim said. It was bad enough they gave him grief about biting random thugs. Tim barely did that anymore, and he was usually pretty good about not using too much bite force and shattering their bones.

Cass hummed and picked Rainbow Road as their next course. “Only if steal me more cookies.”

“Me too!” Bart said. “I want the ones with powdered sugar. It’s like eating a dry ski resort.”

Tim sighed and rolled to his feet. “Fine, take over for me, Bart,” He shoved his controller at the speedster, who used his foot to move the joystick. “I need to go into stealth mode for this to work.”

Getting past Alfred was hard enough as it was, but he was extra vigilant since he learned Cass liked to swipe dessert early. Tim might not make it back to the attic alive. Too bad he had no choice but to do this.

Tim shook his head. To think he was being blackmailed . . . He’d taught Cass too well. She was a terror. (He was so proud.)

***

Max came to pick Bart up at 8:30 and was immune to all threats, bribes, and pleading to let the speedster stay longer.

“I’ll call you!” Tim shouted from the second-story balcony.

“They’ll never keep me away from you forever!” Bart replied. He waved excitedly as Max dragged him away by the collar.

Tim slumped against the railing. “This is like Romeo and Juliet, except platonic.”

“Hopefully it won’t end with one of you dead,” Dick said. He patted Tim’s shoulder. “And hey, there’s no family rivalry. Bart just needs to do homework and get proper rest, just like somebody else I know.”

Tim squinted at him. Why was Dick bringing up Steph? She was great at staying on top of her homework.

Whatever, Tim was going to brood the rest of the night.

Good thing Bart wasn’t the only hoard member he was making up for lost time with.

***

"What the hell, Replacement, why are you here?" Jason said. Tim had been about to knock when he’d opened the door.

Tim beamed and wormed his way inside Jason’s apartment. "I came to see you!"

The place was as dilapidated as Tim remembered. Weapons were spilled over the living room floor, literary quotes were written on the drywall in Sharpie, the couch had more bloodstains than ever, and it smelled vaguely of cheese. But Tim paid none of that any mind. He was too busy flopping against Jason’s chest and purring.

"It's eleven on a Thursday, shouldn’t you be in school?” Jason said, awkwardly patting Tim's shoulder. As soon as someone was nice to him, he got uncomfortable, just like Bruce. He and positive emotions were allergic to each other, and Tim loved it.

"Don't worry, I crawled out the bathroom window and flew straight over. They won't even know I'm gone," Tim said. "Can we play Smash Bros?"

"You crawled out the—no, Tim, get back to class!"

Silly Jason. Tim would rather eat glass.

"I already know how to do math in my head, and human history is boring," Tim said. "There's no point in me being there. Also, I'm hungry. Do you have any snacks?"

Jack's insistence that Tim make friends and socialize with humans was his least favorite of the man's delusions, and Tim had a full-time job keeping his claim of Gotham fresh and fussing over his hoard. He didn't have time for high school.

"Kids these days, wasting their educations," Jason grumbled. He stalked over to the kitchen and threw open the cabinets. "Back in my day, we were grateful to even know how to read."

Tim perched on the counter. "It's not my fault humans evolved badly. You wouldn't need a written language if you had better memory retention."

"That's enough out of you, Timberly," Jason said. He put a kettle on the stove to boil. "I'm not listening to an infidel who skips their English class. You're lucky I'm even feeding you."

Ooh, that was a new one. Nobody had called Tim an infidel before. It looked like Jason was making grilled cheeses. Tim hoped he put jam inside. It had a fun, slimy texture when it was melty.

"What's that smile for, Replacement?" Jason said suspiciously. "You better not be hauling me back to the manor. We've talked about this. Kidnappings are bad, even if they're enthusiastic."

"I know, I know. Don't worry, I just wanted to hang out," Tim chirped. "We're giving you space, like you wanted. Alfred misses you though. He said you're the only one he can trust in the kitchen."

Jason aggressively buttered the bread, ears pink. “Course I am. Everybody else is hopeless.”

Dick was an alright chef, but only made cereal. Bruce liked to channel his nonexistent creative side with cooking and inevitably made war crimes even Tim hesitated to eat. Cass had inherited this trait, but also had no idea that she wasn’t supposed to put metal in the microwave or stick silverware into outlets. As for Tim, he was an amazing cook, but he and Alfred had very different perspectives on the culinary arts.

“One of these days, I’ll have to make you a Tim special,” Tim said. “My dishes are to die for.”

“I’ve seen your abominations and they’re a blight on creation,” Jason said, adding tea leaves to the water. “If I ate what you did, I’d probably die again.”

“At least you wouldn’t stay dead for long,” Tim said, kicking his feet against the counter.

Jason squinted. “That’s worrying.”

“Nothing I do is ever worrying,” Tim scoffed. He hadn’t even *found* a Lazarus pit yet. Jason was paranoid. “You sound like Bruce.”

Jason’s face twitched like a dead frog hooked up to electric wires. “I am *nothing* like Bruce.”

“*Sure,* you’re not.”

It wasn’t like he experienced a hardcore personal tragedy, went on an assassin-themed training montage, then returned to his home city, donned a new mask, and began a personal crusade against crime. The Red Hood was *clearly* different than Batman. Nothing similar about them at all.

“Damn right,” Jason grumbled, taking the grilled cheeses off the stove and cutting them into triangles. “We’re as opposite as night and day.”

Tim took a big bite of his sandwich. He didn’t mention the identical grunts and scowls, or how Jason’s favorite blend was also licorice.

***

Unfortunately, Gotham Academy eventually realized Tim was missing and called his emergency contacts.

AKA the Waynes.

AKA Dick Grayson.

AKA the one human worse than Jack when it came to delusions of parenthood. And also one of the few people Tim couldn’t use Bambi eyes, guilt trips, or (affectionate) biting on, though not for lack of trying.

"You can't make me leave, this is cruel!" Tim howled as he sank his claws into the door frame. "Jason needs me, I'm going to be his murder bro. Red Hood needs a sidekick!"

"No, he doesn't, now get in the car or so help me I'll ground you!" Dick said. He’d rushed over to Jason’s safe house as soon as he’d deduced Tim was there, which was *fast* because Dick was an unfairly good detective at the most inconvenient of times. Tim had barely finished his grilled cheese.

“You’re not my mom, you can’t tell me what to do!”

“Well, *someone* has to lay down the law, and Bruce sure isn’t pulling his weight. Tim, I mean it, behave or I’ll get the chancla.”

More hisses and many swears in Draconic. How dare Dick keep him from the rest of his hoard. This was a gross mistreatment of dragon rights!

“Dragon rights are a social construct!” Dick said. “If you can ignore reality, then so can I. Now stop resisting. I’m getting you onto the honors roll whether you like it or not.”

Dick finally got Tim off the door frame and threw him over his shoulder. Tim tried to wriggle off, but then one of the neighbors opened their door and stared at them, so Tim couldn’t transform and smush Dick.

“Jason, avenge me!” Tim yelled, reaching out toward his zombie.

“No, I’m with Dickface for this one. Have fun at high school, Baby Bird.” Jason said. He edged back into his apartment and muttered something about missing Talia as he closed the door. Traitor.

Once they were in the car, Tim had to sit through an entire lecture from Dick about cutting class, which was the height of hypocrisy. Dick had dropped out of college and was in his fail-girl era; he didn’t have room to judge. Besides, Tim had a great reason for boycotting education.

“Alfred will skin you alive if you do this again, and I’ll help,” Dick said. “You can’t skip school whenever you feel like.”

“But I already know everything!” Tim whined. He had a perfect memory. He didn’t need to show his work or do exams to retain stuff. “School is a waste of time. We should nuke the academy. People would cheer.”

“We’re not going supervillain on an educational facility,” Dick said.

“We should,” Tim slumped against the window. “I only have so much time in the day. I should be spending it on my territory.”

“If you can’t balance territory and school, then you’re not old enough to stake a claim,” Dick said.

“But—“

“You know the drill. If you can convince your dad to let you test out, you can, but I doubt he’ll be pleased you’re cutting class,” Dick said.

“Please, like he’ll find out,” Tim scoffed. He was a hacker. Attendance records were a cinch.

Dick pinned him with a stern glare. “I have him on speed dial. One more absence and I call him. Two and I’m siccing Alfred on you.”

Cruel, evil hoard. This must be how Jason felt around Bruce. No wonder he lived in a dump in Crime Alley instead of a pretty, Gothic manor full of Tim’s cool rocks.

“Fine. *Fine.* I’ll go to school, but I’m not going to like it,” Tim said.

Dick released a breath Tim didn’t know he’d been holding and eased his grip on the steering wheel. “Good, I’m glad we could talk about this like rational adults. No spray bottle involved. That’s good progress.”

The only reason Tim wasn’t jumping out of the car and flying back to Jason’s apartment was that if *Alfred* was willing to break his neutrality, then he was screwed. Jack he could handle, but the grand-butler was in a league of his own.

Rational. Yeah, right.

***

Tim got Saturday detention for cutting class, but it was hard to tell who suffered more, Tim or the faculty. The teacher tasked with being his warden avoided eye contact and pretended not to notice Tim glaring at them with murderous intent. The other kids in Weekend Jail Hell sat as far away from him as possible. Once of them made a cross sign when he looked at them.

Good. Tim wanted the whole world to know exactly how he felt. Hellfire was tepid compared to his angst.

“Did you learn your lesson?” Dick asked as Tim flopped into the Jaguar’s passenger seat afterward.

“Yeah,” Tim said. The moral of the story was don’t get caught. He understood it loud and clear. “You’re evil, Dick. I hope your cereal expires.”

“Now that’s just cruel,” he said, pulling out of the parking lot.

“An eye for an eye. You know I hate Human Kid Jail,” Tim said. “And aren’t you supposed to be back in Blüdhaven?”

“School is not jail, and I’m doing remote work for now,” Dick said. “My boss wants the entire digital archive redesigned, so I volunteered. This way I can keep an eye on you and work on some personal projects.”

Personal what nows? Dick didn’t have projects unless they involved pranks or new gymnastics routines. What was he up to now?

Tim started deducing possible theories, then realized he didn’t care. Whatever the projects were was irrelevant. What mattered was that Dick would be hanging around the manor more than ever. Tim would have to tread carefully.

He loved having his hoard close, but Dick was *way* too good at stymieing his life goals and forcing him to do homework. The next however-long he was in Gotham was going to be torturous. Tim hated following the rules.

At least Tim still had patrol to look forward to. Red Hood wasn’t a threat anymore, so Bruce had eased up on his hovering.

Which meant Tim could “accidentally” end up in Crime Alley to say hi to his re-alived hoard member, which was exactly what he planned to do.

Hanging out with Jason was fun, but Tim had a feeling Red Hood would be just as epic.

He looked out the car window and smiled.

Tonight was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

Notice that if Tim literally behaved consistently for once in his life he could test out of high school? *snorts* Jack sure knows how to hand out impossible quests.

Janitor: I KNEW IT. I KNEW YOU WERE HIDING FILTH FROM ME!
Security Guard: Gary, calm down. It's okay, the blood isn't going anywhere. Just rela—
Janitor: That's the entire problem! I have ONE job. Keep this place spotless, and you are sabotaging me!
Head of Arkham: Perhaps we can come to an agreement. How does a larger bonus sound—
Janitor: ALL FILTH MUST BE CLEANSED!
Security Guard: I knew it was a bad idea to hire one of the inmates for custodial.
Head of Arkham: Stop sighing and help me, he's almost broken through the door!
Janitor *unholy screeches*

Burn, Baby Bird, Burn

Chapter Summary

Tim and Jason spend some quality time together.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to RavenGranger for the awesome beta! You're the best and deserve many nice things! ❤️🐉

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim would never get over how great Bruce was.

The grunts, the looming, the rage at injustice and his manic obsession with rooting it out. They were all wonderful things that made Bruce an Ideal Human, but even better was the fact that he was a pushover.

“You need to stop saying yes to him,” Nightwing hissed over the comms. “We’ve talked about establishing limits, B.”

“I trust Robin to handle a patrol alone,” Bruce said. “He’s been good.”

Tim preened and gave Bruce a dazzling smile as he clambered out of the Batmobile. Bruce twitched a facial muscle back, which was super expressive for him while he was on patrol.

It hadn’t even taken the Bambi eyes to get Bruce to cave. He was relaxed now that Red Hood wasn’t trying to kill Tim and excited to patrol with Cass, who was in the backseat reading *The Hungry Caterpillar*. Batman and Black Bat were the most terrifying duo to ever grace Gotham’s streets. They deserved all the father-daughter time in the world. Tim was almost disappointed he wouldn’t be there to see them in action. Almost.

“Batman, are you compromised? Under the influence? Controlled by Mad Hatter? ” Nightwing said. “You were never this lenient with me or Robin II.”

Tim grabbed his grapple, but before he could leap away Bruce fussed over his cape and handed him an extra energy bar. Boysenberry flavor. Huh, Tim hadn’t known those were even a thing.

While Bruce did that, Cass pulled on her cowl and rolled out of the car. She flopped on the ground like a ragdoll and pulled a bag of fruit snacks out of her batbelt. Clearly, the goodbyes were taking too long for her taste.

“You said I was too controlling. This is me not being controlling,” Bruce said to Nightwing. “Have fun, Robin. Report in every ten minutes.”

“Twenty,” Tim said.

“Fifteen.”

Hn. “Fine. Bye B, bye BB!”

Bruce nodded. Cass waved cheerfully from where she was sprawled.

Tim grappled onto the closest roof and darted away, making sure to rattle his latest bone mobile as he passed. The sound of corpse Legos was the best sound ever.

Dick was still talking with Bruce over the comms, sounding increasingly mad. Tim could hear the tail end of the conversation as he vanished into the Gotham woodwork.

“—worst time to stop being a helicopter parent! Was my suffering for *nothing—?“*

Tim clicked the comm off, then activated his automatic check-in. Bruce would get a Morse code message from him every fifteen minutes, and Tim wouldn't have to bother with actually opening his line with the bats. That was way too much work.

Now, how fast could he get to Crime Alley without using his wings?

***

Red Hood was good at flying under the radar. He'd evaded the cops, Black Mask, the bats, *and* Oracle since arriving to Gotham. It was honestly impressive. Those ninjas Jason stayed with had some great life hacks that Tim wanted in on.

Luckily, Tim was an expert at finding things. Bruce had vetoed the subdermal tracker Tim wanted to put on Jason, but Tim didn't need it to track down his hoard. A combination of his enhanced senses, hacking, stalking various gang members, and calculating the best location for a nest of gangsters via the placement of empty warehouses, and the Red Hood's base was revealed.

He took a moment to pat himself on the back for a job well done. It was always nice to hunt down something, be it information, criminals, or locales. Stalking things was one of his favorite activities and he was *very* good at it.

Some might call knowing Jason's real identity cheating though, since it made narrowing down the potential bases much easier. An abandoned library, really? It was like Jason wasn't even trying to be subtle.

Tim would have chosen something else, like a boat or something with a big basement and a popcorn machine, but there was no accounting for personal taste.

At least breaking in was hard.

"Robin, you're not supposed to be here," Hood growled.

Tim giggled from his spot in the rafters. He had tripped one of the alarms when he came in from the second story and now had a dozen guns pointed at him, courtesy of Jason's many minions.

"I wanted to see you, Hood. Don't worry, Batman doesn't know I'm here," he said.

And he wouldn't so long as his scramble virus made it look like he was still on his normal patrol route. Yay, technology!

"Of course you did," Jason said. He sounded tired, even through the helmet's voice modulator.

"Want us to shoot, boss?" One of the goons asked, turning off his gun's safety. He had hair redder than raw meat. "We can clip the birdy's wings, just like you've wanted."

Red Hood sighed. "No, stand down."

Everyone did a double-take.

"You sure, boss?" another goon said. This one had a tattoo of the Disney Mouse on his bicep. "The Bat doesn't even know he's here. It's the perfect chance for you to have that 'long conversation' you've been after."

"Times change, Mickey," Jason said dismissively. "Robin and I are chill now. Come on, Baby Bird, get down from there. You're creeping my minions out."

Tim hopped onto the main floor, silent as a cat. He shook his bangs out of his face as he stood, internally snorting as the goons tried to look intimidating. It was cute how they thought they could scare him. Tim had been camping; he'd suffered horrors they couldn't comprehend.

"Is there a reason you're in my territory?" Jason asked Tim. "I've made it clear bats aren't welcome."

“Don’t worry, I have a great reason,” Tim said. He spread his arms wide. “I’m going to be your assistant!”

There was a moment of silence. Somebody coughed loudly.

“My what?” Jason said.

“Your assistant,” Tim repeated. “It’ll be how we bond. Robin and Hood, fighting evil by moonlight. It’ll be great! Here, I even had a codename for when I’m with you, that way people will know I’m on a different shift.”

He pointed to the name tag sticker on his chest, which had “Red Robin” scribbled on it in green highlighter.

Tim was going to get a great grade in Helpful Vigilante Buddy. He and Jason could hang out on patrol every night. Sure, the Red Hood was an aloof tough guy who “worked alone,” but so was Batman. If one benefited from having a Robin around, the other surely would too.

“Okay, that’s adorable, but I’m pretty sure the Bat will have a problem with that,” Jason said. “He doesn’t like Robins going off on their own.”

“What B doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Tim said. He smoothed his hair back so it wouldn’t get in his eyes. “Besides, I’m not alone. I have you!”

Hanging out with Jason would turn this from a good night into a great night. Tim lived and breathed for Hoard time. It was the best part of his life.

Plus, since he wouldn’t be *Robin* on patrol with Red Hood, then he didn’t have to follow Bruce’s rules. It was simple math.

“I don’t think this is real,” the red-headed goon whispered. “I might have been dosed.”

“Joker venom,” another one nodded sagely. “I hear it’s airborne now.”

Tim ignored them, but privately wondered why they were still here. This was hoard time, not random thug time!

Wait, were the thugs Jason’s hoard? Did Jason’s hoard count as *Tim’s* hoard? He hoped not. He had much higher standards than these randos.

“Boss, what’s going on? You spent months targeting Robin, why are you so buddy buddy now?” Mickey said, furthering Tim’s point. Too dumb for his hoard, hands down.

“Robin and I have an understanding,” Jason said. “I’m done hunting him.”

“So the birds were for *nothing?”* one of them said. “Come on!”

Tim opened his mouth to say they were welcome to bring him as many birds as they liked, but the rest of the goons were talking over him.

“I thought you were going to save us from the terror bird. That kid is full-on rogue material, Hood. You didn’t hear what happened to my friend McGee. He almost lost an arm!”

“He’s a menace, a *menace!”*

“Look into his soulless eyes. Tell me you don’t see horrors untold in them.”

It was pretty hilarious how worked up they were. Tim felt proud; his intimidation tactics were working! Janet had taught him well.

“You guys are overreacting,” Jason replied casually. “Robin’s enthusiastic and *really* good with thumbscrews, but I wouldn’t call him a terror. He’s adorable.”

There was a long pause. Jason didn't seem to register the incredulous looks his minions were giving him. Either that or he was too far into his Bad Boy persona to care.

"Course, even if you're a sweetheart, I don't want you wandering in my territory, Baby Bird," Jason said. "I have a reputation to maintain, and Crime Alley is a bats-free zone."

Tim saw one of the minions mouth "baby bird" in horror, and he figured Jason's lack of fear was actually cementing him as an even tougher crime boss than before. All the locals knew that Robin wasn't someone to be cooed over unless they wanted an ambulance to ER.

"Don't worry, I'm Red Robin when I'm with you," Tim said. He pointed at his name tag again. "It's a totally different brand, not a bat at all!"

That got a chuckle from Jason. "Okay, you got me there."

"So can I patrol with you?" Tim asked. He bounced on his heels to add some height, that way Jason wouldn't be fooled by his shortness. Tim was mighty, but the world was full of height-ists who forgot that.

Jason hummed, stroking the jaw of his helmet in consideration. His goons looked at him in horror.

"Boss, no," Mickey said. "Whatever you're thinking, the answer is no. You do *not* want this maniac teaming up with you."

"Are you the one writing paychecks here?" Jason said. "Because I distinctly remember hiring *you* to follow *my* orders."

"That's not what I—"

Despite having the most unexpressive mask on the planet, Jason managed to narrow his eyes without actually narrowing his eyes, and he got his minions to shut up with Bruce-level effectiveness.

"Crime Alley is *my* sandbox, not yours," Jason reminded them, "and if Robin wants to hang with me tonight as a *one-time* thing, he's welcome to, understand?"

There was a grudging chorus of “yessir”s and “God save us.”

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said. “Ready to do some recon, Red?”

“Yes!” Tim fist-pumped the air and gave the goons a grateful smile. It would have taken much longer to convince Jason if the goon hadn’t activated Red Hood’s contrariness. “Tonight is going to be awesome.”

“Hell yeah,” Jason said. He gave Tim a high five. “Come on, Baby Bird, let’s go have some fun.”

Tim flashed a toothy grin and followed Hood out of the base.

The goons looked on in despair.

***

Tim had to say, Crime Alley was the place to be. He could see why Jason set up shop here. Gangs loved starting out in the area. It was a wealth of abandoned buildings and cheap labor, the homeless population was composed of kick-butt Gothamites armed to the teeth, and the local Waffle House stood like a dilapidated beacon of hope dripping with bacon grease and asbestos. Tim ranked this area of Gotham a 10/10 and planned to return again and again.

There was also *so. Much. Crime.* Tim was having the time of his life.

So far, he and Hood had stopped three assaults, a mugging, and cheered on a robbery. Jason said it would be wrong to stop it because he knew the thieves were just desperate and that the place they were stealing from had up-to-date insurance. Of course, Tim didn’t actually care about where his victims were from or what their life stories were like. He was an equal-opportunity vigilante, but as long was Jason was happy, so was he.

Still, it intrigued him. Robbery . . . that might be something to look into as a side hobby. Bruce couldn’t complain if he stole from bad people, right?

Speaking of Bruce, the Morse code was working like a charm. He still thought he was over in the financial district, sucker.

“Hey, Robbie,” Jason said over their private comm line. “There’s a deal going down on the border of the Alley and the Narrows. I need some recon done, so let’s head over.”

“Aye aye, Captain Paint Bucket,” Tim said. He grappled to Jason’s roof and did a flip as he landed. “What kind of deal? Is there going to be a fight? Will there be explosions?”

Jason ruffled Tim’s hair. “Don’t call me that, and it’s a drug deal. Heroin cut with fillers. Once I know who their supplier is, I can make my move. It’s going to be a quiet in and out.”

They started grappling toward the Narrows. Tim pouted as they went. “No bombs?”

“Contrary to what Bruce thinks, I *can* be subtle,” Jason replied.

Tim knew that, but why be boring? Explosions were more fun. He thought Jason understood that.

Maybe bringing him home to the manor was affecting his morality. Bruce had that effect on people. Tim would need to confiscate the spray bottle from him so Jason’s worldview wasn’t corrupted by silly concepts like good and evil.

He nodded to himself and put that on his mental checklist, then focused on keeping up with Hood. For now, they had a job to do. In and out, nice and quiet. Tim could manage that, easy.

***

Two hours later, Tim sat on an abandoned roof next to Jason, who stared at the horizon with a haunted expression through his helmet. In the distance, smoke billowed from the Narrows as flames devoured several buildings. Who knew heroine was so flammable?

“I’m starting to see why B and Dickwing are concerned,” Jason said. “You’re a menace. What the *hell* were you thinking, Replacement?”

“Is that a trick question?” Tim asked. They’d found the supplier and accomplished all their goals. It wasn’t Tim’s fault that they were spotted and had to fight their way out. Or that there were a lot of flammable things nearby begging to be lit on fire.

“I said *quiet. Subtlety.* In and out, no violence for once,” Jason said, gesturing wildly. “You were Batman’s stalker, you’re supposed to be good at going undetected!”

Tim raised his hands. “Hey, calm down, Hood. You’re overreacting. It wasn’t a big deal. Property gets destroyed all the time.”

Tim would know. He was responsible for a lot of Gotham’s reconstruction projects, although the rogues always got blamed for it.

Jason ripped off his helmet. “You blew up a warehouse with me still inside it. It was definitely a big deal!”

Tim rolled his eyes. “I was inside too. I knew we’d make it out.”

“That’s not the point, Replacement.”

“You’re upset, I get that. But come on, did anything actually happen?” Tim said.

“Yes! A city block was *razed*.” Jason pointed at the inferno on the horizon.

“Exactly, nothing,” Tim said cheerfully. “Gotham needed an update anyway. Do you think they’ll build gargoyles on the new buildings?”

A fleet of fire trucks tore down the street toward the warehouses Tim set on fire. A few ambulances followed, but Tim doubted they’d be needed. The blaze was spreading, but that section of the docks was pure criminal. Nobody actually lived there, and anybody there on business would be long gone by now.

Jason put his head in his hands and groaned. “This is karma, isn’t it? I girlbossed too hard with Black Mask’s skyscraper and the gods decided to repay me in kind.”

“You’re acting like arson is something bad,” Tim said. “You should really loosen up.”

“I’ll loosen up when one of my boltholes isn’t getting the rotisserie treatment! I have *trauma,* Tim.”

Oh yeah, Joker. Tim forgot that Jason would still be affected by those bad memories since the clown was dead. His reaction made more sense now. Oops.

Tim’s comm crackled to life in his ear.

“Robin, you’re late to the cave. Report.” Batman said. His voice was extra growly. Double oops.

“Hi, B, sorry I’m late, everything’s fine—“ Tim began.

Jason plucked the comm out of his ear and yelled into it. “It’s *not* fine. Your little pyromaniac destroyed over a million dollars of property! Where the hell were you when the sparks started flying, you useless furry?!”

Tim pricked his ears and heard Bruce sigh “Arson, again?” under his breath. The mics Babs made them could pick up so many sounds. They were technological marvels.

“Again? You mean he’s done this before?” Jason looked ready to tear his hair out.

Tim kicked his legs as he watched the fire burn in the distance. It was making a big smoke cloud. He kind of wanted to fly around in it and make loop-de-loops. Jason kept talking with Bruce with Tim’s comm, which Tim counted as his and Bruce’s communication quota for the day.

“*Yes,* it’s a problem! I thought you said he was domesticated. This isn’t domesticated Bruce—*what the hell* are you talking about*,* you never let *me* get away with multi-million-dollar property damage when I was Robin. What happened to you? Bruce? Bruce!”

A few minutes of shouting later, Jason threw the comm back to Tim.

“Good talk?” Tim asked.

“If that’s what it sounded like then I’m taking you to get your ears checked,” Jason said. He put his hands on his guns for emotional support. He looked ready to shoot a man. “Your Crime Alley privileges are revoked, Replacement. No more Red Robin either. *Kevin* had more self-control than you, and he left the bar on the floor.”

Tim scrambled to his feet. “What!? Come on, I didn’t even blow up a skyscraper. This isn’t even in my top three Fun Times moments.”

Top ten, for sure, but Jason didn’t need to know that.

Jason looked at Tim. His eye twitched. Tim got flashbacks to the last time Dick went over ethics with him. It was not a nice look.

A second later, Jason was yanking Tim up by his cape and dragging him toward the stairs.

“’Can’t handle a baby dragon,’ they said,” Jason muttered. “’Not mature enough to be a guardian for the Baby Bird,’ they said. Screw you and your impossible standards, Bruce, *you’re* not qualified. You can’t even stop him from blowing up buildings!”

“Jason, you’re being ridiculous,” Tim said, hopping down the stairs without protest. “I don’t need guardians. I can look after myself. You’re confusing me with a human kid.”

“—running around Crime alley and setting things on fire, terrorizing helpless gangsters, doesn’t even get *grounded* properly.”

Tim rolled his eyes and let Jason vent. He needed to get his feelings out as dramatically as possible, and woe be unto anyone who didn’t play along.

Five minutes and a paragraph of vitriol later, they got to where Jason stashed a blood red motorcycle. Jason shoved a helmet onto Tim’s head and shoved the keys into the ignition, still muttering under his breath about hypocritical bat dads.

“What’s this for?” Tim asked, adjusting the helmet so he could see out the visor.

“I’m taking you home,” Jason said, revving the engine. “Bruce has another thing coming to him if he thinks he can set you loose without supervision. I’m giving him a piece of my mind.”

Tim hopped onto the seat behind Jason and hummed. His zombie was very hung up on the supervision thing, which surprised Tim, given how independent Jason was.

He cocked his head to the side. Then again, it sort of made sense, seeing as how Jason had been murdered the moment he flew solo, but Tim. Was. A. Dragon. The ultimate introvert. The ideal one-man operation. Solitude was his strength, and Tim had no clue why his hoard *still* didn’t recognize that after literal years as Robin.

It was his human form. It had to be. It looked way too helpless. Dumb shapeshifting. It was times like these he missed Janet the most.

Tim nuzzled Jason’s back as he started racing back to the manor. The road was bumpy, so he wrapped his arms tighter around his zombie and breathed in his scent. Another PowerPoint on dragons was in order. He had to remind them that just because he *looked* like a kid didn’t mean he *was* one.

They turned a sharp corner, forcing Tim to cling even harder to Jason. The side mirror lit up with a reflection of the fire fading in the distance, smokey orange and gorgeous. It played off the red chrome of Jason’s helmet, and Tim couldn’t help but grin.

At least tonight wasn’t a total wash. Jason was coming home. That alone made Tim’s headache about human overprotectiveness worth it. Bruce wouldn’t even mind being yelled at; he’d just be glad his son was visiting again so soon.

Tim grinned into Jason’s jacket, very proud indeed.

If all it took was some minor arson to get Jason to go back to the manor, then Tim had to start fires more often.

Chapter End Notes

Bruce: I have learned from my parenting mistakes. I will let my kids be more autonomous since Dick and Jason hated me hovering.
Jason and Dick: THIS IS THE WRONG KID TO TEST THAT ON!

As Raven put it, Tim gets Youngest Sibling privileges.

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

Security Guard: So, any new inmates I should be aware of?
Secretary: Nah, just the usual. Kleptos, personality disorders, and a few more Robin victims.
SG: More? Dang, that's impressive.
Secretary: They need to split the support group into two units. By the way, where's the boss?
SG: Uh, doing important boss things. Why?
Secretary: When he checked in today he was carrying a bucket of mortar and a bag of bricks.
SG: Oh yeah, Gary broke something yesterday. Don't mind it.
Secretary: but--
SG: Everything is fine.

Is it a Crime to Kill in the Alley?

Chapter Summary

Jason's goons need so much therapy.

Chapter Notes

Thank you Raven, for being the best beta ever! Thou art a bright light in this realm of darkness. Typos flee before you.

Also, guess who has a heart murmur? Yaaaaay (dw I'm fine, it's not that bad)

***Note: Chapter 13 has a new scene in the beginning. If you want more of Tim being a chaotic gremlin when he first moves into the Manor, I recommend going back and reading it. 🙂 *

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A couple days later, Dick found Tim at the kitchen table, absently tearing up his physics homework and eating the scraps.

"Nice try," Dick said. He set down a duplicate of the handout. "Your teachers send me them via email now."

Tim mustered a resigned glare. His "I ate my homework excuse" had finally met its end. Well played, Dick.

Dick sat down and made Tim do the problems properly, plus show his work. It was the worst twenty minutes of his life.

"These are all correct, and you did them without a calculator," Dick said. "See how much easier life is when you just get it over with?"

"No, this is cruel and unusual punishment," Tim said. "I object to your primitive educational practices. Dragons do things way better."

Dick raised an eyebrow. "Dragons don't teach their young anything at all."

"Exactly."

It was do or die, sink or swim, fight or flight. Just the way Tim liked it.

Dick sighed, looking far older than his years. Tim blinked, feeling déjà vu. Since when did Dick sound like Jack?

Tim was forced at metaphorical gunpoint to go over his other homework too. Dick used his rank as Tim's hoard to force him to do all manner of cruelties, like compile data from his chem lab and look up news articles for social studies.

"Anyone who knows anything knows that nothing social is ever worth studying," Tim grouched.

"And yet, it's part of the American education system. Shocking," Dick said. "Just be glad Jason isn't here. He'd make you rewrite that entire essay."

Tim hunched defensively over his English homework. Redo that? He'd rather pull out his own teeth (they grew back quick, it'd be fine).

Speaking of Jason, Tim was doing a lot of reflecting. Turned out, burning down part of Hood's territory could be considered rude, even though it was mostly an abandoned warehouse district Bruce had been trying to tear down anyway.

Tim brought this up to Dick, mostly to distract the man from the dreaded homework. Dick nodded in agreement.

“It was definitely going overboard. Remember, you need to respect boundaries. How would you feel if one of us burned part of your nest?” Dick said. “Or threw away one of your rocks? Or rearranged your photo albums? Or—”

“I get it,” Tim said, doodling a decapitated head with the spine still attached in the margins of his essay. “You’re right. I need to be more ‘sensitive.’”

Never mind that Bruce and Dick *loved* moving Tim’s rocks around. Fixing them was an arduous task and could take hours. But Tim never complained because they needed more hobbies outside of crime fighting, and rock moving was a good start.

“I’ll say sorry to Jason,” Tim told Dick. “I didn’t mean to make him upset. I thought he *liked* arson.”

Tim should have gone on patrol with Steph. She was chaos incarnate. There wouldn’t have been any fallout if he’d chosen to be Spoiler the Sequel instead of Red Robin. Jason had even banned Tim from using that name because he was a “danger” to the common man.

Tim was a bit insulted by that. He was a danger to *everybody*, not just the normies. And being called that by a crime lord was hypocritical.

“An apology is a great idea,” Dick said. He patted Tim on the shoulder. “Jason will really appreciate that. His love language is acts of service. Maybe you can do him a favor?”

That sounded way better than writing a note. The only thing paper was good for was making origami airplanes and starting fires.

“Okay, I’ll try that. Thanks, Dick,” Tim said.

“No prob, Rob,” Dick grinned. “Now excuse me, I have some delicate business to attend.”

He got up and pulled out his phone to message someone.

Tim asked what it was for, and all Dick said was, “Laying the foundation for something truly delightful,” which made Tim both curious and wary.

Dick was good at hiding it, but he was obsessive and neurotic about certain things. One look at his delusions of motherhood was proof of that. People just forgot he was conniving because the things he focused on were weird.

Tim decided he was going to keep his nose out of whatever new madness Dick was conducting. Tim had far too many things on his plate to add a Dick Grayson special to his life. As long as it didn’t involve camping, he’d be fine.

Anyway, back to Jason.

What kind of help would the Red Hood appreciate?

***

Tim decided subtlety was his best course of action. Jason was mad because Tim hadn’t been subtle enough on patrol, so obviously Tim needed to do something sneaky to get back into his good graces.

Easy peasy.

He hacked into Jason’s phone, went through his messages to find out which gangs Red Hood was having trouble with, and borrowed Babs’ security cams to track them down. She wouldn’t mind. She’d taught him how to hack; that was basically giving Tim blanket permission to piggyback her codes.

The fruits of those labors only took a few days to gather, and then Tim had the foundation for a glorious apology.

All he needed now was to slip away on patrol, and it'd be perfect.

***

"B, can I go on my own route tonight?" he asked in the Batmobile that evening.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "After last time?"

"That was Jason's fault," Tim said automatically. "I was framed."

The other eyebrow crept up. "Framed. I see."

"I got a *little* bit excited because of all the flammable chemicals, but it won't happen again." Or, at least, not tonight. "Jason's just dramatic. Nobody even died."

Bruce hummed in agreement. Tim was glad the bar was so low. Bruce's laid-back parenting was great. Dick could learn from him.

Cass peeked out from the back seat, a bit bleary-eyed since she'd been taking a nap. "Murder bad, Timmy. No cookies for you."

"I haven't killed anybody ever," Tim lied. "Stop treating me like I have."

Cass gave him a look that Bruce thankfully missed. She totally suspected Tim of manslaughter.

"Anyway," Tim said, gently shoving her back into her seat, "I want to say sorry to Jason. Dick said I should, and I'm initiating an apology. That's human behavior, right? You're not going to punish me for acting human."

Bruce tapped the steering wheel in consideration.

“You know I’m going to go off on my own anyway,” Tim said. “This way you can at least keep track of me more easily.”

Bruce forbade Tim from putting subdermal trackers in his hoard, but because of that, *he* wasn’t allowed to put a tag on Tim either, and Tim was great at ditching his trackers whenever he felt like it.

Asking to go solo was a courtesy, not a request, and unless Bruce wanted to comb the city for a rogue dragon, he’d let Tim do what he wanted.

“Alright, but I want regular check-ins. Personalized ones, not Morse Code.” Bruce said. “Black Bat and I will be in the Diamond District. If you miss a report, we’ll come after you.”

“Deal,” Tim said.

As soon as he was out of earshot he activated his new code. Prerecorded messages instead of Morse. Bruce wouldn't suspect a thing.

Now, time to get to work.

***

Jason was still using the abandoned library. Tim slipped in easily, managing not to set off any alarms this time. The trick was crawling on the ceiling. Tim loved having claws.

Red Hood was in the main room (vaulted ceiling, lots of rafters) talking to a couple of his goons about a summer reading program he wanted to set up.

“—of course there’ll be prizes for the adults too, asshat. Do I look like a savage?” Jason said.

“But are you going to count *all books,* or just the fancy ones you like?” the goon (oh, it was Mickey) said.

“You can read *Magic Treehouse* and *The Hardy Boys* for the rest of your life, I won’t judge you,” Jason said. “If it has words, it’s reading. ‘Literature’ is just a gatekeeping tool used by the elites to shame the masses. *Don’t*—“ he pointed a pistol at the other goon, who looked ready to argue. “—get me started on this, Eric. I’d be here all night, and we have stuff to do.”

The goon, Eric, shut his mouth and nodded, proving he was a veteran Jason Literature Rant Survivor.

“We dealing with the Maroni family tonight?” Mickey asked. “I heard they’re planning something.”

Tim hummed. They were, but he doubted it’d happen tonight. Penguin was more likely to cause a scene.

“Leave the Maronis alone for now, tonight we’ll—fuck,” Jason said. “Tonight, we’ll be playing babysitter.”

The goons and Tim frowned in confusion, but then Jason pointed his gun at the ceiling and fired three rounds.

Tim was trained by Batman. He was a pro at not flinching in the face of danger, but this surprised him. And since he was surprised, he let go of the ceiling.

“What the—” Mickey said as Tim crash-landed in one of the half-rotted bookshelves. Dust, paper, and moths flew everywhere.

“Hood, come on!” Tim coughed, crawling out of the rubble. Oh gross, it smelled like higher education. “How did you notice me?”

Jason marched over and picked Tim up by his collar. Tim dangled like a wet cat, impressed by how strong his zombie was. One hundred and thirty pounds plus Robin gear was a lot for one arm to carry.

“You made noise, idiot bird,” Jason said. “You’re slipping.”

Tim blinked. The humming gave him away? Did Jason have super senses?

“Boss, do you want us to throw him out?” Mickey said, sounding like he hoped Jason wouldn’t make his goons step closer to Robin.

“Yeah,” Jason said, nodding toward Tim. “Don’t hurt him, but get him back to the main street.”

“What?” Tim said. “You’re getting rid of me?”

“You’re not welcome here right now,” Jason said. “Sorry, kiddo, you had your chance and you blew it. Literally.”

Mickey and Eric stepped forward to grab him. Tim bared his teeth at them and hissed, then turned his Bambi eyes onto Jason. Even with the mask cutouts, they were very effective.

“But I came to apologize for last time,” Tim said. “I even got you a gift.”

“Don’t care.”

Tim put a hand over his heart. “You *don’t*?”

“No, I—stop that, you big faker,” Jason said. “I know those are crocodile tears.”

They were, but that wouldn't save Jason. Tim let his lip tremble a bit more and sniffled. It sounded as pathetic as Dick whenever he ran out of cereal.

“Can it, Rob, you’re too old to play that card,” Jason said, sounding discomfited. “I’m not falling for it.”

Tim turned morosely to the door. “Ok, fine. I’ll go. I just wanted to make you happy, but you’re right. I should’ve known better.”

He hung his head and shoulder-checked the goons as he passed, making sure his cape was flat and mopey, and his posture defeated. It was body language that screamed sadness. Cass used it with devastating effectiveness with Bruce and taught Tim her ways.

Three, two, one . . .

“Okay, fine, stop moping. What did you get me?” Jason sighed.

Checkmate.

Tim spun on his heel and grinned like the sun had risen. There was a collective wince from the humans, and Jason told Tim to turn off the sparkles again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t care,” Tim said. He ran up and grabbed Jason’s arm, excitedly tugging him toward the door. “Now come on, Hood, it’s a few blocks away. You have to come see what I did. You’re going to be *so* proud.”

“Alright, fine, let’s go, but then you have to get out of my hair,” Jason said. “I’m a busy guy.”

“It’ll be quick,” Tim chirped.

He dragged Hood out of the library. Mickey and Eric trailed behind him, looking worried. Several other goons glanced up from their desks, saw Robin, and quickly looked back down. But a few

brave souls looked intrigued and joined the parade.

By the time they hit the streets Tim and Jason had six or seven henchmen trailing after them. It was like being followed by demented, murderous ducklings. Too bad they weren't wearing yellow.

Tim was tempted to bite one of them for fun, but that would make Jason upset, so he resisted the temptation. Shame though; his teeth ached. Tim really wanted to gnaw on something.

A few blocks south of the library was the beginning of the industrial zone. Gotham had a hotspot for factories in the 80s, but after all the nightmarish building code violations had been discovered, all the old buildings were left to rot. Now the working factories were on the west side of the city, leaving this shell behind.

Tim tugged Jason to it, glad that this part of the city was so dilapidated. It made hiding things so much easier.

While they walked, Tim chatted Jason's ear off about all the fun things he'd seen on patrol that night. Cats, dogs, rogues, the works. There was even a lady who'd been walking a pet beaver near Robinson Park. Tim vowed to stalk her home so he could unravel the mystery of her life. He'd never seen anybody with a beaver before!

He wondered how they tasted.

They reached a gutted paint factory. Tim had found it on patrol a year ago and came back to visit it on a whim. Little did he know it was the perfect Mysterious Lair to leave presents for his hoard. He'd have to get more of them for the future.

"Okay, we're here. Your present is inside," Tim said, smiling his happiest smile. "You're my favorite, so I made it extra special."

"Favorite, huh?" Jason sounded smug even through his helmet. "I like the sound of that."

The goons took one look at its yawning doorway and Tim's grin, and they took several steps back.

“You should *not* like the sound of that,” Eric said.

“Boss, remember the arson incident?” Mickey said. “Don’t be fooled. This kid is insane.”

“Some fearsome criminals you turned out to be, he’s practically a baby,” Jason said, then turned to Tim. “What’d you find, birdy?”

Tim frowned at the baby comment. It didn’t matter that in dragon years Jason was technically right. Infantilization was going to kill his reputation.

“I was looking over some footage, and I found one of Black Mask’s drop points. I remembered that you’re trying to take him down, so I decided to help!”

Tim ushered them inside. The interior was a yawning pit of darkness interspersed with chains hanging from the ceiling, broken crates, rusted equipment, and mysterious stains.

“So, is this the drop point, then?” Jason asked. “Good find, kid. I appreciate it.”

Tim shook his head and walked up to a chain that was suspended from the ceiling. “No, that’s over by the docks. This is just a good place to store bodies.”

“To store *what* now—” Jason said. “Kid, did you murder someone?”

“Of course not,” Tim said, ignoring the goon who was muttering “No-kill rule” like it was a prayer. “I’m an innocent as driven snow, remember?”

Jason stared at him. It was amazing how expressive he was through the mask. “Innocent. *You.”*

“Yup,” Tim said. “That’s why I had to get creative with your gift since murder wasn’t an option.”

Bruce's rules, unfortunately, were something Tim was making a token effort to follow for the man's peace of mind. Sure, he'd murdered the Joker, but that didn't count. Tim would have had to have seen him as a living creature for it to be valid.

Bruce had also reminded Tim that the 3 rules were Tim-rules, not just vigilante-rules, after Jason narked on his Red Robin loophole, which meant Tim's thank-you gift options were limited.

Luckily, he was very creative for a dragon.

Tim yanked a chain hanging from the ceiling, releasing the counterweight that'd kept his surprise tied up near the rafters. One of Black Mask's cronies screamed as he fell into view, suspended upside down for Hood's interrogating pleasure.

"Check it out," Tim said. "I couldn't bag the lieutenant, but this guy seemed pretty high on the pecking order. You can interrogate him! Consider it a late welcome to Gotham present."

The criminal caught sight of Robin and started to cry.

Tim was very proud of himself. He wasn't breaking any of Bruce's rules, Hood's investigation sped up, and Jason got to keep harassing Black Mask. Win-win-win!

Hood and the minions' reactions weren't as positive as he was expecting though. They looked *horrified.*

"Boss, that's Kevin!" Mickey cried.

"Robin's gone full murder-hobo!" one of the younger goons said.

"Mom was right, I should have moved to Cincinnati when I had the chance," a third one said. "Thug life is not worth this."

Were Gotham's criminals really this easy to traumatize? Tim felt cheated. They were supposed to be tough, and he hadn't even been trying.

"Robin, that's my guy," Jason said, horrified. "You kidnapped my double agent!"

Tim blinked, then shrugged. "Well, they definitely won't know he's working for you now."

Not his fault the guy was a mole. Tim had just been doing his job. Besides, being kidnapped and tortured would get the guy serious street cred once he came back to Black Mask alive. Plus, Tim had heard that rogues were offering therapy benefits for people who ran into Tim in a dark alley, so Kevin had his mental health in the bag for the foreseeable future.

Jason put a hand over his helmet's eyes. If there was a nose on his headgear, he would have been pinching the bridge. "Robin, I appreciate it, but you don't need to bring me people to torture. I can do that myself and not kidnap my own men in the process."

"But I *want* to help. Leaders need to learn to delegate." Tim said. "Besides, you're one of my role models. I've learned so much about people from you."

Way more than school ever taught him. Jason was a great example of human-related stuff, *and* he got to kill people. Making him his idol seemed like a pretty solid bet.

"Either God is dead or I am," Mickey said. "This universe is a joke."

Kevin kept crying, resigned to suffer.

Jason crossed his arms. "That's seriously flattering, Baby Bird, but Crime Alley is my territory. You gotta respect that. Now get Kevin down."

That wasn't fair. Jason shouldn't be allowed to use the territory card; that was fighting dirty.

“Fine, I was just trying to be nice,” Tim grumbled. He pulled the chain again and let Kevin fall onto the dirt. Several goons rushed over to untangle and drag him to safety.

“Get him back to base,” Hood ordered them. “Grab him a shock blanket too, and the Emotional-Support Bazooka.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Make sure it’s unloaded. We don’t want a repeat of last time.”

“Yes, boss.”

The goons left faster than Tim thought humans could move, Kevin hunched over Mickey’s shoulder in a fireman carry. Tim tilted his head and considered chasing them for fun, but Jason stomped over and blocked the doorway, arms crossed. In Tim’s experience, that was never a good sign.

“Sooo, you didn’t like my present?” Tim asked.

“Hell no. It took months to get Kevin to defect to my crew, and now he’ll need serious therapy,” Jason said. “Double-crossers are hard to come by. I’m lucky that Black Mask is a terrible employer. He doesn’t even offer dental. But now Kevin is going to cash in his PTO and set my operation off by weeks.”

Huh, Kevin’s backstory explained why he’d gone to town on that skyscraper when he’d had access to the Emotional-Support Bazooka. Hell had no fury like a disgruntled employee. What was more amazing was that Kevin hadn’t been caught by Black Mask or any of the Bats after that debacle. He must have been a surprisingly sneaky guy.

“Should I have killed the lieutenant instead?” Tim frowned. “Would that have made you happier?”

Jason shrugged. “Dunno. How bad was his rap sheet?”

Tim shrugged back. “Who cares? Dead is dead.”

Jason froze. Full-on froze like an old computer monitor. Then he grabbed Tim’s cape and started dragging him back outside.

“Batman and Nightwing really weren’t kidding, you have zero sense of proportion,” he grumbled. “Wanton violence has its limits, Tim.”

Tim licked the air to make sure Jason hadn’t been replaced by a pod person. Nope, same scent. “What are you talking about? You murder tons of people.”

“Yes! Serial killers, rapists, evil people who’ve had a chance to change their ways. Not innocent Kevins in the line of duty!”

“How innocent can he be? He works for a crime lord.” Tim said.

“He’s going to be in charge of my summer reading program, that makes him a saint.” Jason snapped. He activated his comms to summon B. “Damn it, Dickface was right, you are a terror. And I thought the arson was bad.”

Tim scowled at Jason. This was hypocritical to the nth degree.

“I thought we were murder bros, but you’re just a hoe,” Tim grumbled.

Jason released a slow, angry breath. “I resent that, and for your information, I have a very strict moral code. Just because it involves more decapitation than most vigilantes doesn’t make me some creep stalking through dark alleys to kill whoever I feel like.”

Which was hilarious of him to say, since that was how most of Gotham saw him.

“If Batman didn’t have that funky list duct taped to the fridge, would you be killing any random thug you ran into?” Jason demanded.

“Why do you think he made that rule in the first place?” Tim asked, honestly confused.

Jason facepalmed. “That was a *rhetorical* question, kid.”

Oh. Oops.

“So, just to be clear, you won’t kill people I bring you?” Tim asked.

“Not unless they deserve to die,” Jason said. “I may have lots of collateral damage during shootouts and a long list of fatalities under my name, but I’m careful about anything premeditated. The last thing I want to do is kill some two-bit thug who’s only in it to support his family.”

Right, that made sense. Jason was a bleeding heart like that.

“But if they are evil, disgusting people, you’ll kill them, right?” Tim said.

Jason pinged Bruce’s comm again to tell him to hurry up, then gave Tim the side-eye. “Duh, Robbie. That’s my whole thing.”

Perfect.

“Okay, so there’s this bodyguard named Chad—“ Tim began brightly.

Maybe the night could be salvaged after all.

Or not.

“Dousing himself in axe-body spray is not evil,” Jason said after Tim vented about the evils of Chad's existence for several minutes. “I don’t kill civilians just because they’re annoying. Unless he has actual, horrifying crimes under his name, he’s chill in my book.”

Tim scowled. Chad would never break the law; committing a crime meant leaving the gym for longer than an hour. Tim would never be free from this hell.

“Can’t you make an exception?” Tim said. “I’ll even hide the body for you.”

Tim tried to activate his Bambi eyes again, but Jason smacked him lightly over the head. “*No.* We only kill bad people, Tim. That’s my whole shtick.”

“Good and evil are social constructs, they don’t matter,” Tim said.

Jason paused and took a deep breath. “Okay, we’re unpacking that right now, starting with Milton’s Paradise Lost.”

Tim took a big step back. “No thanks—”

Jason grabbed his arm and reeled him back in. “Too bad, Timbucktu. You mess with the bull, you get the horns. Now sit your ass down and pay attention. Morality is—”

Tim groaned and went boneless, flopping to the floor in agony. Jason kept ranting about the normative ideology and cultural differences in moral tradition, and Tim considered knocking himself out to escape it.

He didn’t Macgyver the perfect apology present only to get a morality lecture from *Red Hood* of all people in return.

Both Tim and Jason were disgusted that this even had to occur. Tim because he’d thought Jason was beyond petty things like morals, and Jason because he was in his Bad Boy Era and didn’t want

to have to be the “responsible’ one.

Alas, Jason’s love of literature was stronger than his pretend hatred of ethics. Hatred that Tim was discovering was a complete *lie.*

“You’re as reliable as Gotham’s legal system,” Tim grumbled, “and your morals are as bad as B’s.”

Jason gasped. “You take that back!”

But Tim would not. He was *betrayed.* So much for Murder Club, Jason was just like the rest of his humans.

Of course, he should have seen this coming. Apples never fell far from the tree; Jason was his father’s son through and through.

***

By the time Bruce arrived in the Batmobile, Tim was steaming. He threw himself into the passenger seat and glowered as Jason marched back into the depths of Crime Alley, muttering about murder lizards, dragon toddlers, and high school’s inability to teach literary allusions properly.

Tim was miffed about Jason. To think he came so close to liberating himself from morals only to chicken out at the last second. Human rules about killing were the worst, and Jason was officially a disappointment.

“Get your feet off the dash,” Bruce said. He nudged them off when Tim refused to move them, then eased the Batmobile back onto the road.

“This is all your fault,” Tim told Bruce. “You’ve corrupted my hoard.”

Bruce grunted that Tim should have thought of that before hoarding a family of vigilantes.

“When I invent a time machine, I’m telling my past self that. See how you like it when I become the Riddler’s assistant instead,” Tim said. “He wouldn’t make me shackle myself with petty rules about killing.”

“Hn,” Bruce said as he pulled into the underground tunnels built under the city. His grunt translated to ‘no shit, Sherlock,” and was usually used on JLA members when they commented on something obvious.

Tim scowled. “Hey, I’m a *great* assistant to Red Hood. It’s *your* fault for all those morality lectures. He won’t let me elevate his M.O!”

“The lectures are working?” Bruce had the gall to smile.

Tim’s eye twitched. He was tempted to pull the copy of *Dealing with Troubled Youth* out of the glove box and throw it at him. But no, he had better control than that.

And there were worse forms of revenge.

“I’m telling Alfred you swore. Grunt-swears count, he’ll believe me.” Tim said.

Bruce looked at Tim in betrayal. Good, now he knew how Tim felt.

They’d need to get a bigger swear jar at this rate, courtesy of Jason. Alfred said when it was full he’d buy himself a trip back to London, which was great motivation for everyone to watch their language, especially Bruce. Bruce was helpless without Alfred.

“One of these days we’re going to have a normal patrol,” Bruce muttered, hunched over the steering wheel. “One where the only ones committing war crimes are the rogues.”

Tim propped his feet back on the dash. “In this economy? You’re crazy.”

Bruce sighed as he pulled into the Batcave. “Let me dream.”

Chapter End Notes

Tim: I've never killed anyone ever.
Bruce: I know this and I love you.
Cass *squinting*: Sus.

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

Secretary: Boss-
Arkham Director: Not now, Matilda. I have matters to attend to.
Secretary: This is important-
Arkham Director: Is it DEFCON 5, situation critical?
Secretary: No, but-
Arkham Director: Then I trust you to take care of it on your own. Just forge my signature if anything needs to be signed.
Secretary: I don't think that's legal—aaaaand he's gone again. Great. Oh well, if I have clearance, then I have clearance.
picks up phone
Secretary: Hello? OSHA? yeah, I'm calling back about that yearly safety inspection. Seems we're overdue for ours--yes, I know the year is almost over—no I—look, can you just get someone to come in before New Years? Awesome, thanks.

Shut Up and Dance (With Cass) ✨

Chapter Summary

Cass and Tim get a new hobby.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Ravengranger for betaing once again! I love seeing your feedback, it's the best part of my day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason had a list of rules for Tim. It was on the fridge right next to Bruce's.

WWJD: AKA What Would Jason (want you to) Do?

1) Do not kill my goons

2) Do not traumatize my goons

3) Do not maim my goons

4) Do not burn down any of my buildings

5) Do not go into the Alley without supervision

6) Tell me when you're breaking rule five because I know you will

7) Follow Bruce's rules because THE BAR IS SO LOW, TIM

Dick smirked whenever he looked at it, glad Jason was suffering like he was. The cat that had eaten the canary had nothing on Dick's schadenfreude.

Meanwhile, the list almost made Tim regret bringing Jason back to the hoard.

"These rules feel very pointed," Tim said. "I want addendums."

"And dead thems?" Cass echoed, slouching over him so her chin rested on his head. She squinted at the list and started sounding out the vowels.

"Loopholes," Tim clarified. "Like my Red Robin one."

Of course, Bruce had "fixed" that once Jason ratted Tim out. Now Bruce's list specified the rules were for Tim and all his past, present, and future aliases, so Tim had to look for new ways to get around them.

"Should do what Jason wants," Cass said, poking his cheek. "Make him happy. Cook more food for us. Cookies, even. Or cake."

Tim nipped her finger, careful not to break skin. "That's a good point, but being a rebel is more fun."

He actually didn't mind following Bruce's rules. . . . Okay, he *did,* but only because he'd been following rules his entire life. Pretending to be human, going to school, not killing Janet—*of course* he was rebelling. It was his duty as a teenager to fight back against authority figures, and giving into his instincts was the easiest way to do it.

Jason was also a rebellious teen *and* he got to murder people. He of all people should have had Tim's back. What a shame he turned out to be a square like everyone else. Human morals were a disease.

Cass hummed. "True. It is fun to be sneaky. But no killing, Timmy. I will be sad."

Now that was below the belt. Tim could live with disappointing everyone else, but Cass was a pro at guilt-tripping him.

"Fine," he sighed. "No loopholes for killing."

He didn't promise anything about ones for traumatizing or maiming people though. He wouldn't even use them often, just as a treat.

Tim was restless. He wanted to stalk Gotham at all hours and fight anything that moved. Janet said that was natural for his age, but Tim couldn't burn his energy fast enough, and the constant limits on how and who he could fight weren't helping. One of these days he was going to snap, just to finally exhaust himself.

Cass poked his cheek again and pulled his lips into a smile, oblivious of (or more likely, ignoring) Tim's inner struggles. "Good baby dragon."

"Again, I'm almost the same age as—"

"Shh," Cass said, covering Tim's mouth with her hand. "Your words just noise. No mean anything."

She lifted him up and started dragging him from the kitchen. Tim sighed and got his mouth free, not even bothering to resist. There was no point; Cass was better at ignoring reality than he was. Whatever she wanted to do would happen, and he was powerless to stop it.

"Where are we going?" Tim asked.

“Must learn to be harmless human better. Both of us,” she said, turning down another hallway.

Ah, looked like they were going to the media room again. Cass really liked TV, especially since it counted as language comprehension practice.

“What are we watching this time?” Tim asked as she dragged him to her lair.

“Dancing show,” Cass said. “Pretty kicks and spins. Like fighting, but safe.”

Cass threw Tim onto the couch, then sat on him so he couldn’t escape. *Dancing With the Stars* began to play, and Tim resigned himself to being her cushion for the rest of the afternoon.

“You really like this,” he said an hour into their binge. His legs were asleep, and Cass was humming along to the music.

She nodded. “Want to spin too. Be a dancing queen, like Dick’s favorite song. Rule the world with pretty twirls.”

Cass flashed a determined smile. It was the look of someone who’d discovered the purpose of their existence and was ready to go all in. Tim felt the excitement catch.

“Do you have room for a partner?” Tim asked. “I’m good at twirling.”

And spinning, leaping, lunging, and anything that got him moving. Dancing was a hobby he could get behind.

Cass beamed. “Yes! You are my lovely assistant, like in magic shows.”

“Sure, but I’m *not* wearing fishnets,” Tim said. “They’re way too cold.”

Dick used them for some of his outfits and always complained about how they were tight and not comfy at all. Such was the price of fashion.

Cass flicked his nose and rolled her eyes. “You do what I want forever. No choices for you.”

“You wish.” Tim lied, sticking his tongue out. Just because she was right didn’t mean he would make it easy for her.

He pulled out his phone to look up dance studios, despite the looming threat of whatever outfits Cass would force him into.

Jason was still banning him from Crime Alley, Bruce was making Tim stick with him on patrol again, and Dick was forcing him to study for finals, but none of them could get mad at Tim for a hobby as harmless as this.

If he was lucky, some of his restlessness would calm down with a new sport to keep him busy. Gotham Academy banned him from all competitive sports when he was eleven after Tim broke a classmate’s leg during four square, so Tim’s only physical exertion happened at night. If he tired himself out during the day, maybe he wouldn’t be so tempted to go all out on patrol. A dragon could hope.

“How about this studio?” Tim asked, shoving his phone at Cass’s face.

“Has five stars. That’s good, I like stars,” Cass said. “What is this word? B-A-L-L-E-T?”

“That, my dearest Cass,” Tim said, “is ballet. A fancy dance for fancy people. I think you’ll like it a lot.”

It had floofy outfits, awesome long dance sequences, and needed lots of skill to do correctly. It was perfect for her.

“Yes, but want to know all the dances,” Cass said, shoving the phone back at him. “Not only one.”

Tim hummed. Another episode of *Dancing With the Stars* started up. The intro music would be in his head for days.

“That can be arranged,” he said.

There were all kinds of dance studios in Gotham, and nobody said they had to pick just *one.*

***

Tim’s stalker powers were coming in clutch, as was Bruce’s detective training. His years of experience as a vigilante made tracking down the best of Gotham’s dance studios easy as reciting the first 500 numbers of pi. Which, for Tim, was *very* easy.

The hard part was picking which studios to actually attend.

Cass was doing ballet. That was set in stone.

She was also signing up for every other dance class they could find. It was very exciting.

“All of these?” Dick said. They came to him when they couldn’t decide on which schools to choose. “That’s a lot of extracurriculars. There will be new people at each one, too. Are you sure, Cass?”

“Yes. Timmy coming with me,” Cass said. “Protect me from extroverts.”

Dick’s eyebrows shot up as he stared at Tim. “You *want* to go out of your way to do normal human stuff?”

“Cass wants to, so I do too,” Tim said simply.

Dick stared at him, then spread the armful of dance studio pamphlets across the coffee table. “In that case, let’s get you both signed up. Jack is going to cry tears of joy. Now, how many dance styles are we learning? Eight? Twenty?”

“Five,” Tim said fondly. “Ballroom, swing, flamenco, hip-hop, and ballet.”

Cass wanted to learn every style in the world, but there were only so many hours in a day, so they’d content themselves with these for now, then move on once they mastered them.

“Five? We can totally do five,” Dick said. “I support this with every fiber of my being.”

Cass hopped in excitement as Dick began making calls. Tim couldn’t help but grin as well. The only time he’d danced was when he was really little and Jack spun him and Janet around the living room at Drake Manor, an old record player grinding out show tunes in the background. He didn’t think these dance lessons would be like that, but the idea of spending time with a loved one, no words between them? That was right up Tim’s alley.

“You can come too,” Cass told Dick between calls. “We can all be dancing queens.”

“Aw, thanks, that sounds fun,” Dick said, “but I’m spread a bit thin right now with work, Tim, and . . . other stuff. Don’t worry though, I’ll practice with you guys at home. Bruce made sure I learned ballroom when I was younger.”

Cass nodded, then went back to reading the pamphlets. She typed the words she didn’t know into her text-to-speech box and repeated them under her breath to remember the pronunciation.

Tim left her to it and frowned at Dick. “You keep saying other stuff. What other stuff? Is this that project you mentioned a while ago?”

Dick chuckled. “It’s just something to help me blow off steam. I’ve been stressed lately. I need an outlet.”

He got a vacant, far-away look in his eyes. “Some days I wake up and just want to go apeshit. You can relate, right, Tim? I’ve been too well-behaved recently. The scales must be balanced.”

Tim leaned away from Dick, who was exhibiting Concerning Emotions. Not sadness, but a twitchiness reminiscent of Jack when he didn’t get enough family time.

Normally, Tim would be excited Dick wanted to let loose, but he’d been on enough camping trips and “bonding activities” to know that manic humans were a terror unto themselves. Dick was a pro at pretending to be a well-adjusted adult; the fact his facade was cracking had all of Tim’s alarm bells ringing.

Cass looked at Dick, then at Tim, also concerned.

A second later, Dick shook his head and laughed airily. “Sorry, got a little serious there. Don’t worry about me, Tim, I have *everything* under control. Next year is going to start with a bang.”

Funnily enough, that didn’t make Tim feel better. The last time Dick got a “bright idea,” he’d joined the PTA. Whatever unknown horror was cooking in his brain would be just as bad, and Tim wouldn’t be able to stop it. Once Dick set his mind to something, it happened one way or another. The best thing Tim could do was stay out of the crossfire.

He picked up the next pamphlet and typed in the studio’s phone number. They still had a lot of calls to make to get Cass’s classes chosen. With luck, they could attend a few sessions before the end of the year. He’d focus on that instead of whatever Dick was plotting.

Sometimes ignorance was bliss.

***

Breakfast in the manor was generally peaceful. None of them were early birds, so Alfred liked dragging them out of bed for food before they got "rowdy and unmanageable." Tim was used to spending long periods of silence at the table, lost in the fog of sleep deprivation while his hoard struggled to stay conscious around him.

Today, however, the silence was broken.

"Hn," Bruce said. He turned another page in his newspaper and grunted again. It was his 'here we go again" grunt, minus the swear words he always added to it when Alfred wasn't in the room.

"Waz up, B?" Dick yawned, mouth still full of half-chewed cereal.

"We've been had."

That got people's attention. Everyone scuttled to Bruce's side of the table as he laid the paper down for them to see.

IT'S A GIRL! WAYNE ADOPTION BUG STRIKES AGAIN!

Gotham's own Bruce Wayne, notorious for his love of black-haired orphans, has been spotted with yet another child. Vicki Vale, leading expert on the Wayne Family, says that an adoption was confirmed for this mystery girl a month ago. Who is Cassandra Cain-Wayne, and what is her story? Find out more on page 3 . . .

The front page was a candid of Cass and Bruce, who had his hand on Cass's back as he pointed at the ballet studio Tim had found, smiling at her like he was witnessing an angelic manifestation. Which was pretty accurate, because Cass was making heart eyes at the studio so big that Tim suspected several citizens reading the newspaper would have already keeled over and died from cuteness overload by now.

"Well, this isn't good," Dick said, flipping to page three.

"Hn," Bruce agreed.

“It’s a good photo though,” Tim said. “The photographer knew how to adjust the exposure really well.”

The same couldn’t be said for a lot of paparazzi. Tim was glad whoever snapped this shot had class. Cass deserved to look good, even in the gossip rags. No, *especially* in the gossip rags. If they misrepresented her, Tim would have to pay their offices a personal visit with his best friend, Molotov Cocktail.

Cass poked the paper, looking curious. “Trouble?”

“It’s more annoying than anything else,” Dick said. “Whenever Bruce adopts someone, the media goes crazy and demands interviews and pictures. We were hoping you’d stay out of the spotlight longer. Paparazzi aren’t fun to talk to.”

“I will talk to them with my fist, make them stop,” Cass said.

“I’ll help,” Tim said, now wide awake.

“Hn,” Bruce said, which meant he agreed with the sentiment but wouldn’t let them go through with it. What a stick-in-the-mud.

Dick sank back into his chair. His cereal was mush now. “So, what’s the plan, B? We can ask the papers to lay off for a few more weeks, but it’s only a matter of time before we have to give an official statement.”

Tim nodded. He’d kept all the news articles about Jason’s adoption for his collection. It’d been a fiasco, and Dick’s a three-ringed circus.

Bruce stroked his jaw, then cast an appraising eye at Cass. “Would you like to come to a gala? It’s a big party with food. You could meet a lot of people and talk to a couple of reporters.”

Cass cocked her head. “Party? With cake?”

Bruce ruffled her hair. “I’m sure they’ll have some.”

Cass hummed in consideration. She’d heard Tim complain about galas a lot over the summer. “If I go, less trouble for you?”

“You can attend if you want to,” Bruce said. “Don’t worry about me. I fight with the media all the time, it’s no trouble at all. Pick whatever you want to do, Cass.”

She stroked her chin, mimicking Bruce’s detective face. Tim could see her mentally weighing the scales: wearing a fancy dress and eating good food versus talking with the Gotham elites and being on camera. It was a tough choice.

“Ok,” Cass said. “Party, but I bring my DS.”

“Deal,” Bruce said, while Tim cheered. Finally, some decent company at one of these events.

“What gala are you thinking?” Dick asked. “It’s pretty short notice to host one ourselves.”

Bruce grunted as he turned to the weather section of the paper. It was a long grunt containing paragraphs of information about Gotham’s gala scene, who was hosting what, and which they’d be attending.

Huh, Tim had forgotten that gala was even happening. He’d been too distracted with Jason’s apology gift and keeping up with Young Justice’s weird communication methods. (They’d stopped using chats. Tim suspected they were communicating via phone calls or carrier pigeons.)

“The Police Ball? Yeah, that’s a pretty good one,” Dick said, pulling Tim back to the present. “I forgot it was so soon. I’ll need to get my new suit expedited. I could have sworn it was a few more weeks away.”

“How do you forget what day New Year’s Eve is?” Tim asked. “It’s literally your birthday.”

The Waynes were horrible at remembering the holidays (Christmas was this weekend and Alfred only just bought a tree), but Dick was obsessed with birthdays. It made no sense.

Dick looked out the window. “I like celebrating other people’s birthdays, mine not so much. I’m busy these days, remember? There’s so much to prepare . . . it’ll be worth it though. Yes, it’ll be wonderful.”

He smiled like the Mona Lisa watching a city burn. Bruce raised his eyebrow, looking dangerously close to asking what Dick was talking about.

“Cass needs an outfit too, but a classy one, not whatever you got,” Tim said, changing the subject. Dick was giving him Jack-before-an-anniversary vibes and he didn’t like it. Let the human scheme by himself, Tim wasn’t going to involve himself with it. He’d learned from Janet’s mistakes. Nothing good ever came from enabling people like Dick and Jack.

“I’m offended,” Dick said, snapping out of his villainous aura. “I have great taste in clothes.”

It would have been more convincing if he hadn’t been wearing a Barbie crop top with plaid leggings.

Chapter End Notes

Dick *schemes something*
Tim: What is this? I don't like it. Someone make it stop.

The natural order has been upended. How will Tim cope?

Meanwhile, at OSHA:

Butch Lesbian: Why am I scheduled to inspect Arkham on New Year’s Eve?
Boss: Because I am a pithy and cruel man, as you constantly remind me. And they bribed us so much.
Butch Lesbian: *sigh* I hate this place. If I could fail our own safety inspection, I would.
Boss: Whatever. Say hi to the Riddler for me while you’re there. I’ve always thought he was a

funny little man.
Butch Lesbian: He’s killed over a dozen people.
Boss: Such a funny little man.

Also, guys! guys! Deitybird wrote THE CUTEST AU of Dragon Tim getting de-aged. There's a link in the "inspired by" section and you NEED to read it. It will give you enough Serotonin to survive until New Years. It's so perfect. I would kill for you Deitybird, you're incredible! ❤️❤️❤️ *goes off to reread it again and cry because FEELS*

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Chapter Summary

Dick's scheme begins, Tim celebrates, and Cass uses a new word to devastating effect.

Meanwhile, Jason enjoys a peaceful night, for once.

Chapter Notes

For better (definitely for the better) nothing bad has happened to me recently . . . it's suspicious. and creepy. so creepy. Is this the calm before the storm?

Thank you RavenGranger for the awesome beta! I am not worthy of thy edits *bows so low I crack my spine and wheeze* owww

This chapter gave me grief, then got 1.5k longer than I anticipated, so hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December was Tim’s favorite month. The weather was crisp, the holidays were battling for dominance, and the rogues were more active than ever. Mr. Freeze froze the city center on the 26th, blocking most of the roads with mounds of ice. The commuters weren’t happy, but Tim liked watching it turn into black sludge from all the pollutants.

But aside from all that, there was another reason Tim liked this month: Dick’s birthday.

Dick claimed they didn't need to celebrate, and that the only gifts he needed were Jason giving up killing forever and Tim earning a 4.0 GPA, but neither of those were looking likely, so Tim helped organize a surprise party for him instead.

So far, Tim hadn’t celebrated any of his hoard’s birthdays. Jack had banned him and Janet from buying gifts after several incidents, so doing so hadn’t crossed Tim’s mind.

But then he remembered that loopholes existed.

The birthday gift ban was only for family members, not hoard members. Tim could get Dick as many presents as his heart desired, and nobody could stop him.

When Dick woke up on the 31st, it was to Tim standing directly over him holding a dead rat, grinning with all his teeth and wearing a party hat.

Once he finished screaming, Dick was pretty grateful, and there was plenty more where that came from.

"You really didn't need to do all this," Dick said as Tim dragged him downstairs. "I've had plenty of birthdays. I'm more into celebrating other people's."

"Well, you've never had *this* birthday before, and you're going to enjoy it," Tim replied. "I went all out for you. It's a token of my affection!"

Dick deserved to be appreciated; bad puns, love of romance, and terrible taste in clothes notwithstanding. Tim was a responsible dragon; he knew his duties. His hoard deserved the best, so the best they'd get.

The dining room was cluttered with over a hundred gift boxes. Bruce blinked tiredly from the head of the table, half-buried under presents. A smörgåsbord of breakfast food was spread across the table and it smelled divine (Alfred had been delighted to help Tim with the birthday preparations). Cass was shaking one of the presents, and—

"Jason, you're here too?" Dick said in surprise.

Jason, hunched at the end of the table, looked up from his copy of *Persuasion* and shrugged. "Timmy insisted. My presence is your present, Dickwing. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Dick smiled and lunged forward to give Jason an octopus hug.

“This is the best day ever,” Dick sniffed. “A post-Christmas miracle!”

“Can’t breathe,” Jason wheezed. Dick reluctantly let go.

Alfred came in, maneuvered around the brightly wrapped gifts, and presented Dick with an ornamental cereal bowl and silver spoon. “Congratulations on surviving another year, Master Dick. I hope there will be many more to come.”

“Aw, thanks, Alfie, you shouldn’t have,” Dick said. “And don’t worry, I have zero plans of pulling a Jason.”

Bruce choked on his tea but was ignored.

Jason just rolled his eyes. “Way to respect the previously dead, Dickface. Once your birthday’s over, I’m getting revenge.”

“You like gallows humor!”

“I like making people uncomfortable with gallows humor. There’s a difference.”

After breakfast, Dick opened his presents. It took a long time, since Tim had bought an entire cereal aisle for him and wrapped all the boxes individually.

"I hate to say this, but even I might not be able to finish all of this," Dick said after unwrapping his eighth box of Trix. “I’m only human.”

"That's what I'm here for. The Captain Crunch won’t stand a chance," Tim said. “Cass will help too. Right, Cass?”

She shrugged from where she was clinging to the ceiling. She’d moved up there a while ago and was somehow eating a bowl of Lucky Charms upside down.

Dick also got more personal presents. Tim's rat, of course, and Tim’s report card (C’s and a B-), a new car from Bruce, a meditation course from Alfred, and—

"Why did your dad send me something?" Dick asked Tim in bewilderment.

Tim slumped across the table and did a full-body shrug. "I dunno. He said something about passing a mantle or whatever. I stopped listening after the first six words.”

Dick raised an eyebrow and opened the battered FedEx box, then gasped like the female lead in a 1950s action movie when anything remotely shocking happened.

"This . . . this is . . . oh my god," he said, awed. "I can't believe it."

Bruce and Tim exchanged confused looks. Was what Jack sent seriously better than a fancy sports car or a dead rat?

Dick jumped to his feet, holding aloft a familiar, half-melted arm brace. Tim recognized his own bite marks on it, probably from the time Jack tried to get him and Janet interested in zip lining.

Jack sent Dick his old body armor? Why?

Bruce picked up the note attached and read it aloud. “Dear Richard, thank you for your help humanizing my son. I hope these come in handy for the days to come. Sincerely, Jack Drake.”

Dick cackled like a two-bit villain. "Take that, Janet, even Jack admits I'm great at this. I am the most trusted pseudo-mother-brother-parent to live!”

He spun like a ballerina, and Tim blinked imaginary sparkles out of his eyes.

“You are insane,” Jason said, flipping to the next chapter of his period romance. “As soon as your birthday’s over, I’m putting you in Arkham.”

Dick was too busy putting on his arm bracers to reply.

***

The rest of the day passed as peacefully as it could with Jason in the manor. Bloodshed was almost avoided, until Dick and Jason got too competitive during a Mario Kart tournament.

Tim watched them wrestle on the floor and took another bite of cake. He should probably intervene . . . nah.

Sadly, there were no grievous injuries, so they were still scheduled to go to the police ball that night.

“You’ll do wonderfully,” Bruce told Cass while they were all getting ready. “My most well-behaved child.”

“Bar is low,” Cass said, shrugging on her coat. She’d stolen one of Tim’s three-piece suits for the gala. After a bit of tailoring, it fit her like a glove.

“So low,” Bruce agreed. He turned to Dick. “Are you sure you want to come, chum? It’s your birthday, you don’t have to.”

Dick smoothed his gelled hair and continued to primp in front of the parlor mirror. “Thanks, B, but no way am I missing this. I have many marvelous plans for tonight.”

“Evil plans?” Tim asked. Or worse, *Jack*-level plans? Dick had his scheming face back on.

“Nah, just diabolical,” Dick said. “I have a hot date.”

Tim took a large step back and pretended to throw up.

“I’m supposing that’s the reason for your . . . flamboyant attire,” Alfred said tactfully.

“You betcha! Don’t I look great?” Dick beamed, gesturing to the crime against nature he was wearing.

It was a baby blue rhinestone coated suit, banana yellow leather shoes, and a tangerine bow tie with tiny cupids on it. Dick also had electric blue eyeliner, and Tim wasn’t sure if that was to match with the police uniform color or just to be extra snazzy. Either way, Dick was dressed very . . . himself.

“You dress the way Tim eats,” Jason said from his armchair, still reading *Persuasion*. Despite claiming he hated the manor, he was in no hurry to leave. Probably because Alfred kept distracting him with snacks. “Your suit looks like Michael Jackson threw up on Barbie’s Dreamhouse.”

“Jason, be nice to your brother on his birthday,” Bruce said while avoiding looking directly at Dick’s suit.

“I’ll be nice when he stops assaulting my eyes.”

“There’s just no accounting for good taste around here,” Dick shook his head. “Heathens, the lot of you. I’m a snack.”

“A *Tim* snack,” Jason said.

Tim was offended. His snacks were good. Dick was a brightly dressed war crime.

“At least it will give Ms. Vale something to talk about,” Alfred said with resignation.

“I’m glad you see my vision, Alfie,” Dick said, giving them a disco-ball-worthy twirl. “After tonight, I’ll be the talk of the town.”

“Yes, distract the news,” Cass said, attempting to put on her tie. “Human shield. Protect me from cameras.”

“I thought I was the shield,” Tim said.

“No, you mustard gas. Emergency only,” Cass said.

Well, as long as she agreed he was dangerous.

Bruce walked over and fussed over Cass’s tie. She looked so dandy. Tim was glad she chose the suit instead of the dress Dick bought her. It matched his glitter abomination, and Cass didn’t approve. (It was in the incinerator now, where it belonged.)

“If all goes well, we won’t need human shields,” Bruce said. “We’ll go in, answer some questions, and Cass will eat her weight in dessert. It’ll be a peaceful gala for once.”

“Bet,” Jason said from his chair, then leaned forward, flipped to the next page, and muttered about Wentworth being an ass.

“There are normal galas?” Tim asked. All the ones he’d been to had either been attacked by rogues, snipers, or were so incredibly boring that Tim threw champagne on people to liven things up.

“There used to be,” Bruce sighed, looking mournfully out the window.

“Cheer up, B, it’s nice having some excitement outside of our night job,” Dick said, putting the final touches on his makeup. “I think tonight will be very, very fun. I’ll make sure of it. Now, I’m heading out. Gotta beat the traffic to pick up my plus one. I’ll see you guys at the event.”

He strolled out of the room, leaving everyone to wonder which poor model would have to suffer seeing his outfit up close and personal. Tim was fairly confident Dick was setting a new world record for how many bedazzled items an adult man wore on a single outfit.

On the bright side, Dick's monstrosity might outshine Cass's introduction to Gotham high society and save her from appearing at more social events.

"I'm going to regret this," Bruce said, stating it as a fact as he watched Dick's baby blue Rolls-Royce vanish down the road.

"Yup," Jason said, kicking his feet up as he reached the final chapter of his novel.

Tim envied Jason. House-sitting sounded much more fun than interacting with rich humans.

At least Cass was coming. She was the one good thing about tonight.

***

Two hours later, the Waynes walked across the red carpet. Cameras flashed brighter than grenades, and Tim batted away a dozen microphones on his way up the stairs.

Cass was the talk of the town. Bruce's adoption announcement was released a couple days before, and everyone wanted to meet the new Wayne. There was some confusion about her origins, but that's why they had chosen the police ball. Plenty of journalists there to get quotes and clear things up.

"Hate this. Too many people," Cass said. She was wearing a pair of Gucci sunglasses. Bruce had let her borrow his mother's clip-on pearl earrings too, so she looked amazing.

"You're doing great," Bruce told her, hand on her back. "I'm proud of you."

"Leave early?' she said, tugging his sleeve.

Bruce's smile became softer. Several more cameras flashed to catch the expression. "If you want, but they have a special dessert after midnight. You can only get it if you stay."

Cass looked mulishly at the throng of humanity, made some mental calculations, then turned to Tim.

"Mustard gas," she said. "Protect me."

Tim's next step was a skip. "You are speaking my language."

"No murder," she said, booping his nose. "Only growls."

"I will compromise: no murder, but I get to nibble," Tim said.

Janet always said reporters didn't count as people, so it should be fine.

They made it up the final steps to the ballroom rented for the night's gala. An employee took their coats, and someone else signed them in.

"If you're going to bite someone, make sure it's not caught on camera," Bruce said, ruffling Tim's hair. "And that you have a socially acceptable reason for doing so."

"What's a socially acceptable reason?" Tim asked, very curious.

"Rogue attack," Bruce said.

"What if Vicki Vale asks me a racist question?"

“Vicki knows better than that,” Bruce said. “We used to date, and she likes kids.”

“What if someone else asks me a racist question?” Tim said. “Like that guy from Metropolis. Or the lady from Star City. Or—“

“You know what I mean, Tim. Jack has a list. Follow the list.”

Bruce was talking about The Drake Guide to Taking a Dragon to a Gala (or any other public venue), which was completely inaccurate and an affront to inhumanity. He made it sound like Janet was always one second away from burning the venues to the ground, which was patently false. Janet had too much appreciation for architecture to do that; it was more likely she’d cause a diplomatic incident by throwing her drink at a politician or giving a death threat to anyone who looked too long at Jack. Normal behavior, nothing to be worried about at all.

“Dad’s list is asinine,” Tim said. “I’m very well-behaved in public.”

He hadn’t bitten anyone at a gala yet, and he’d gone his entire high school career without sending another kid to the nurse. He was practically domesticated. It was awful.

The look Bruce sent him was very doubtful. Humans.

“Relax, B,” Tim said, rolling his eyes. “I got this. You go talk to your rich jerk friends. Cass and I will hang out together. It’ll be fine, promise.”

They’d planned tonight out perfectly. Tim and Cass would talk to a couple reporters, then hide behind the chocolate fountain until Dick appeared to keep them company and field the elites who wanted to talk to them. Meanwhile, Bruce would distract the crusty, judgmental hoo-haws from interacting with Cass, and when the clock struck midnight, they’d all grab a slice of lava cake and book it out the door. It was a flawless plan, and hopefully give the papers enough material to not need to interview Cass until after Valentine’s Day.

If all went well, Tim wouldn’t even *need* to bite someone, although he wouldn’t pass up the chance if it came.

“Alright,” Bruce said. “But I’ll be nearby. If you need me, I’ll come right away, okay?”

“’Kay,” Cass nodded, looking more nervous. This was a big deal for her, and she wasn’t a fan of crowds unless they were gang members she got to beat up. Tim could relate; violence was much easier to understand than the strange, human social conventions these parties revolved around.

Tim curled his fingers around Cass’s and flashed a smile her way. “I’m here too. Your mustard gas, remember?”

She returned it shyly and squeezed his hand. Tim rubbed his heart, wondering if this was how the Grinch felt when his major organ grew three sizes.

“Come on,” Tim said, grinning (no teeth) as his face warmed with happiness. “Let’s go say hi to Gotham.”

***

The Police Ball was a fundraising event for the very corrupt, ineffective GCPD, and included an auction after midnight. Mostly, however, it was an excuse for Gotham’s 0.001% to dress in blue and gossip.

Tim always forgot how much he hated gossip until he had to deal with it.

“I’m running out of sparkling cider,” he told Cass. “I might need to bite someone soon.”

“Push them in chocolate fountain instead?” she suggested.

Tim hummed. That was a good idea.

After twenty minutes of socializing, Tim was ready to throw hands. They’d planned for questions about Cass, her background, adoption, and special needs, but Tim had been blindsided by the rumor mill and high society’s inability to keep their opinions to themselves.

He hadn't thought petty violence would be necessary, but it was the only language people understood.

"You can be honest with me, Timmy. Can I call you Timmy? You're such an angel," Mrs. Waterloo, a woman Tim regretted remembering the name of, said. "There's no need to insist Cassandra here is a Wayne. You're far too similar to be anything but related."

Splash.

"I always thought a man like Jack had to have more children. Nice to know he does." A tech company's CFO mused. "Quite the scandal though. How does your mother feel about the affair?"

Splash and a kick to the shin, with an added hiss translating to a grudge against the man's bloodline.

"Are you two twins?" a third person blurted out, then apologized and ran before Tim could dunk them in his (recently refilled) glass of grape juice.

Tim shared another incredulous look with Cass. Being mistaken for siblings was one thing, but thinking Jack would *ever* cheat on Janet was like believing birds were robots used to spy on people. Tim *ate* birds; he knew that wasn't true.

Bruce sidled up to them, clutching a flute of champagne. "How are you two doing?"

"I am confusion," Cass said. "But snacks are good."

She grabbed a fancy cracker from a passing server and shoved it in her mouth.

"Everyone keeps thinking we're related," Tim said. "We don't even look that similar, it's driving me crazy. I'm *this* close to emoting over it."

He held up his fingers an eighth of a centimeter apart, which translated to roughly two more comments about his parents. The only reason Tim hadn't ripped anyone's throat out yet was because Cass was keeping a tight grip on his arm and because he didn't want to make her sad. She'd steal all his cookies if he did.

"I'll tell Jack to make a statement," Bruce said. "I should have expected this."

"Why?" Tim said, leaning against Cass.

"Because we live in a racist, bigoted society," Bruce said bluntly. "The matching outfits don't help."

Tim blinked. They weren't matching. Tim's suit was charcoal and Cass's was jet black.

Bruce shook his head. "Next time someone asks that, remind them to watch their mouth, then tell me their names. I'll take care of them."

His voice lowered to its Batman register. Tim was glad Bruce went into instant Dad-mode for Cass. She loved having a good father figure, especially since Bruce also wasn't a fan of words. They were so perfect for each other. The impulse to lock them both in the attic forever was strong.

"The Goncharovs are calling me," Bruce said, looking over at a group of rich Italians in Lardini suits. "I'll be back soon. Don't cause a scene, Tim."

"I never cause—"

Bruce walked away before Tim could finish his sentence.

What.

"My hoard is abandoning me," Tim told Cass. "This is betrayal."

“No, that Bruce,” Cass said. “You do same thing.”

“I do not!”

“Do too.”

“Do—“

Tim’s sophisticated argument was interrupted by a reporter shoving a microphone both his and Cass’s faces.

“Miss Cassandra,” the guy said in a thick, almost indecipherable Chicago accent. He had oily blond hair and a tie with red airplanes on it. A camera man for Channel 7 news stood behind him getting live footage for their station. “I’ve noticed you share a striking resemblance to Mr. Drake here. Is it true that you’re his recently discovered biological sibling? Are you being adopted by the Waynes to hide a scandal in the Drake house? Do you have any comments about the rumors going around?”

Tim felt the last of his patience snap.

The reporter took a large step back as Tim growled, teeth bared.

“Wow, Mr. Drake, such hostility,” he smirked, confirming Tim’s theory that some humans were born with no sense of danger. “Did I hit a nerve?”

Reason. Logic. Emotional maturity. Dick said Tim was supposed to use those when he was upset.

“My dad would rather hang himself than *look* at someone other than Mom,” Tim got through his teeth. “Take it back or you’ll regret being born.”

Boom, correct social procedure, no blood involved at all.

The Channel 7 reported smirked wider (*how?*) and moved his microphone from hand to hand. “Well, Mr. Drake, surely you can see why we’re confused. Given the resemblance between—“

Tim moved to pounce and was only stopped by Cass dragging him back a foot with one hand. Curse her muscles. If Tim wanted to get free, he’d have to transform. Didn’t she understand that Tim needed to defend his parents’ honor?

Cass squeezed his shoulder, looked the reporter dead in the eye, and pointed at him before saying, “Racist!”

A half-dozen people turned to stare, whispers spreading through the crowd like wildfire.

The reporter suddenly lost his smirk. “Miss Cassandra, I assure you that was not my inte—“

“Racist!” she said louder, then sniffled. A crocodile tear fell from her eye.

The whispers turned into clicked tongues and phones set to record.

“Look what you did,” Tim said, catching on. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“I didn’t mean—“

“Yes you did!” Tim said. “This is harassment.”

“You’re blowing things out of proportion—“

“Bruce! Channel 7 is libeling us!” Tim yelled as loudly as he could.

The reporter sputtered another excuse, and Tim was tempted to punch him in the teeth. Alas, Cass kept him squished by her side while pretending to cling to *him* instead, so Tim's hands were tied.

Luckily, biting wouldn't be necessary. Bruce was storming over in all his fake himbo glory, Dad-mode in full swing.

It was time for the Waynes to ruin this man's whole career.

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"Remind me not to get on your bad side," Commissioner Gordon said half an hour later.

"You shouldn't need the reminder," Tim replied. He and Cass had retreated to the snack bar and stole an entire charcuterie board. Some of the guests gave them stink eyes, but after Bruce reamed the reporter on live TV and promised to sue, nobody was brave enough to say anything.

"I'll drink to that," Gordon said. "Ah, there you are, Mr. Wayne."

"Heya Jim, love the party. Did you use last year's decorations?" Bruce said as he appeared, finally done calling his lawyers. He ruffled Tim's and Cass's hair. Tim squawked and leaned away, but Cass bumped against his hand like a cat. She was in a good mood after calling one of the TV humans a racist. Tim was so proud of her for using her words.

"I see you two have been causing trouble," Bruce said. "Good job, keep the caterers on their toes. I took care of that man for you. He won't bother you ever again."

Which meant the guy had probably been fired. Good. Of course, Tim was still tempted to pay the reporter a nighttime visit to teach him the consequences of his actions. Permanent consequences. Reporters didn't count as people, right? They were free game.

"No killing. Only social murder," Cass said, as if she could read his mind and not just his body language.

“That’s right, only social murder,” Bruce said.

“Yet you two get away with killing my joy every day,” Tim said, turning back to his plate of crackers. He wasn’t even hungry. By now he was just eating because he was bored.

“Trust me, none of us are sad to see him go,” Gordon said. “Now introduce me to your newest kid, Wayne.”

Bruce did with his usual flair and dramatics, gushing about how wonderful Cass was and how grateful he was to have her in the family. His face alternated between enough positive emotions that Tim shuddered. Bruce wasn’t supposed to emote so strongly; it was creepy.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Gordon said ten minutes into Bruce’s compliments of Cass’s perfection. “Out of curiosity, where *did* you find her? I’ve heard different theories all night, but not from the source.”

“Oh, well, you know—“ Bruce began.

Cass had an official backstory, paper trail, and sob story that took all week to make. Jason helped dream it up and got *really* into it since he got to make up all sorts of cool stuff for Cass’s mysterious past, so it was needlessly complicated and full of literary plot devices from the 1800s.

“We found her in the attic!” Tim said, destroying all that hard work.

“Yes, live there for months,” Cass said. “Timmy feed me sandwiches.”

“I domesticated her all by myself,” Tim said. Jack’s How To Be Human classes had come in clutch for teaching Cass the mystic ways of her kind, not that Tim would ever tell his dad that, if only out of spite.

“Right . . .” Gordon said. He looked at Bruce, probably hoping for a punchline.

Bruce sighed a sigh that single parents around the world would feel in their bones, and Tim saw the exact moment he decided to hell with it and put his Brucie smile back on.

“Well, you know how it is, Commish,” he said. “Orphans just turn up everywhere these days! At this rate, I’m going to run out of room in the manor. I’ll have to tell the stork to cancel my subscription. Isn’t she just darling though? An absolute angel.”

“You adopted a teenager who was squatting in your attic?” Gordon said, deadpan. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

Cass stuffed another cracker into her mouth. “Free real estate, boomer.”

Teaching her slang had been Tim’s best decision ever.

Gordon’s mustache twitched. “If this is an elaborate scheme—“

“I could never lie about anything to you, Jimmy,” Bruce lied. “We’ve known each other forever. Do you really think I could hide anything from you? I’m not that creative.”

Bruce laughed an airy, socialite laugh so fake it sounded plastic.

Gordon’s expression dried even further. “I think you’re a better liar than you let on, *Brucie*. I better not see your daughter ‘out late’ at night, or we’ll have words.”

Bruce grinned wider. It was gross seeing him so expressive. Tim liked him better when he talked in grunts; his Brucie Wayne act gave Tim hives.

“I’m not a gateway to nighttime tomfoolery, Jimmy,” Bruce said. “You make it sound like everyone I know gets involved with Gotham’s night venues.”

“Because it’s true,” Gordon said.

Tim stole Cass’s sunglasses and made a mental count of all of Bruce’s acquaintances. Gordon had a point. The only one who wasn’t a hero or a rogue by now was Alfred, seeing as how Tommy Elliot went to the dark side a couple years ago (Bruce still wouldn’t let Tim track him down and tear off the man’s fake Bruce face, even though the sicko was impersonating his favorite hoard member. It wasn’t fair.)

“Well, I can assure you that won’t happen with Cass,” Bruce said, throwing an arm around his new daughter. “Tim introduced her to it for me, and she’s taken to it like a duck to water.”

Cass and Tim nodded excitedly. Gordon took a deep breath as a vein pulsed in his head.

“This isn’t funny, Bruce,” Gordon said. It was a good thing they were in a quiet corner, because this was turning into one of Bruce and Gordon’s serious arguments. “You can’t keep endangering kids. Even if they’re . . .” He glanced at Tim. “ . . . Unique, you need to keep them safe. Not endanger them like this. Am I the only one who remembers Jason?”

Bruce’s hand tightened around his champagne glass, but his smile didn’t waver. “I’m sure if Jason were here, he’d be up to just as much trouble as them. He always had a flare for the dramatic, you know.”

A certain duffel bag of heads came to mind.

“Look, Bruce—“ Gordon said. Tim’s Lecture Sense went off as the commissioner geared up for a long, half-whispered conversation about child endangerment.

Tim scanned the room for an easy escape. He got enough lectures from his hoard; he wasn’t going to put up with it from a random human. All Gordon had going for him was that he was related to Barbara. Tim literally didn’t care about him outside of that, especially when he always insisted on bringing up the elephant in the room about Jason, or the Bats, or anything vigilante-related.

His eyes were drawn to an offensively bright, glittering suit.

“B, Dick’s here!” Tim said, interrupting Gordon’s rant. Perfect timing.

Then the crowd parted and Tim got a full look at Dick, and almost dropped the charcuterie board.

Dick’s scheming face suddenly gained context, and Tim was connecting the dots. He’s *said* that tonight would go off with a bang, and Tim had no doubt that would be the case.

Because that wasn’t a model hanging off his arm.

That was Barbara Gordon giving him a passionate kiss in front of a news station camera, and she was dressed to match.

Chapter End Notes

Jack: I sense a disturbance in the force. Jan, I think somebody just besmirched you.
Janet: Don't care.
Jack: Don't care? Darling, I CARE--why are our lawyers calling us?
Jack:
Jack: WHAT DO THEY MEAN ANOTHER CHILD?! Cass isn't our child! Tim wouldn't let us adopt her!
Janet: Jack, it is 4 AM, for the love of God, go back to sleep.

Meanwhile, at Arkham:

Butch Lesbian: Hi, I’m here for your safety inspection. Sorry I’m so late, I had three other places to check out today.
Secretary: No worries, I like overtime, take as long as you need . . . and honestly, I wouldn’t mind if you inspected me as well.
Butch Lesbian: Careful what you wish for. I hear I’m pretty thorough.
Secretary *slides her her phone number*
Butch Lesbian *pockets it*

10 minutes later

Security Guard: Who's that lady wandering the halls?
Secretary: *Breathy sigh* That's our OSHA inspector. Isn't she hot? I hope she gives ME a once-over.
Security Guard: Yeah keep dreaming—wait, our WHAT now?
Secretary: OSHA inspector. You know, for our yearly—Hey, where are you going?
Security Guard: To find the boss and Gary before it's too late!

Meanwhile:

Butch Lesbian: What the hell is this weird, bricked-up door doing here? The blueprint says it's a cell. And who are you?
Gary, holding a mallet and a homemade detonator: The one who shall redeem this asylum of lies from filth!
Arkham Director, appearing around the corner out of breath and manic: STOP HIM, HE'S GOING TO LET SCHRODINGER'S CAT OUT!

Boom

How to Disappoint a Father Figure in Five Seconds or Less

Chapter Summary

Content Warning: Dick's flirting.

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you to Raven the amazing beta, and blessed be thine edits.

On a less happy note, my suspicion last chapter about life being good was well-founded. I found out yesterday a family pet died, and am currently experiencing Emotions. Not fun. I can see why Tim avoids them.

Anyway, let us not dwell on sadness. There is much of it in the world and I'd rather focus on things that make me happy.

And on that note, I got hit with the creative muse the other day, so there's some art at the bottom of the chapter, woo-hoo!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The look on Gordon's face when he saw Dick making out with Babs was priceless. Tim ranked it up there with seeing his third-grade teacher realize collective punishment was a Geneva violation.

“Excuse me,” Gordon said. He shoved his drink into Bruce’s hand and marched toward Dick and Babs, argument about child vigilantes forgotten.

“I am confusion,” Cass said. “What is that?”

“Kissing. It’s evil,” Tim told her with a shudder.

“No, know that. Mean the clothes.”

Barbara was wearing a bubblegum pink puffy gown speckled with jewels the size of robin eggs. It reminded Tim of the ball gowns girls wore to the prom in Dick's high school rom-com movies. Babs' wheelchair had been bedazzled as well, and she had glittery eyeliner to match Dick. Even her hair was done up with sparkly glitter streamers. Normally, Tim would classify such an outfit as a war crime, but somehow it looked amazing on Babs, even beside Dick's monstrosity.

"Want one," Cass said. "Want lots of those. One for you too, Tim."

Tim had a mental image of them spinning around a ballroom, then crashing into each other like bumper cars.

"We should get Impulse one too," he said. Bart would like a poofy dress, especially if it was made of soft fabric.

"I'll put in an order," Bruce said. "Now, come on. I need to see this in person."

He speedwalked after Gordon with a skip in his step. A smile pulled at his face, less plastic than Brucie Wayne normally was, but very gleeful.

Bruce's practical jokester side had been activated, it seemed.

Tim, Cass, and Bruce reached Dick and Babs just as Gordon arrived, mustache fuming with parental protectiveness. A crowd of reporters, rubberneckers, and rich people were gathered loosely around them, watching everything with interest. The cameraman looked particularly riveted.

"Richard, what do you think you're doing?" he said in a voice that could have air-conditioned the Sahara.

Dick looked up from where he was twirling a lock of Bab's hair between his fingers and grinned a playboy grin. "Hey Gordon, funny running into you here. I didn't know you were invited!"

"This is a police fundraiser, of course I'm here," Gordon said.

“Woah, yeah, you’re right, I forgot,” Dick said. He cocked his head to the side. “No wonder everyone is wearing blue. I thought it was a statement thing.”

Barbara giggled. “You’re so funny, Dick. I *told* you Dad would be here. That’s why we came together, remember? To share the news?”

Tim leaned against Cass to protect himself from the supernaturalness that was Barbara Gordon *giggling.* All his alarm bells were ringing. Some sounds weren’t meant to be heard.

“News?” Gordon’s eyes were glued to Dick’s hand, which was rubbing tiny circles on Barbara’s shoulder.

Dick laughed. Several middle-aged housewives turned to look at him and swooned. The camera man (Gotham Channel 10) zoomed the camera in on his face.

“Oh yeah, so Babs and I have been catching up—” Dick said, leaning against her wheelchair like the playboy magazines painted him as, “—and she mentioned an opening in Gotham PD’s main branch, so I’m thinking of transferring.”

“He’s overqualified for Blüdhaven,” Babs said. “Absolutely wasted on them, don’t you think, Dad?”

“I mean—” Gordon began.

It was a lesser-known fact, but Dick’s record was beyond competent. He’d messed up when creating his police officer persona and made himself too good at his job. He said he’d needed to prove his worth to the BPD, but Bruce told Tim later that it was because Dick couldn’t resist showing off. Either way, the end result was a nepo baby policeman with one of the highest solve rates on the eastern seaboard, and any department would be lucky to have him.

“I’ve been spending too much time away from home,” Dick said, “Blud’s great, but there’s nothing like that Gotham smog to get me going. There aren’t nearly as many beautiful girls in Haven either.”

Babs chuckled. “Any you’ve got your eye on?”

Dick looked down at her with a soft, gooey expression that could melt chocolate. “Just one.”

They exchanged twitterpated expressions that involved lots of bit lips and fluttering eyelashes. Tim and Gordon shuddered in tandem, though for different reasons.

“Have I mentioned you’re gorgeous?” Dick said. “Like, dreamboat, drop-dead gorgeous. Love the outfit.”

“Of course you do,” Barbara said. “You bought it for me.”

“The only place it’d look better is on the floor—“

Gordon coughed. “Richard!”

Dick blinked and looked up from Babs in surprise. “Oh, Commish! Sorry, forgot you were there. Anyway, Babs, I’m in Gotham for a while doing remote work. I know we said tonight was just for catching up, but I think I’m going to need some *extensive* quality time to get to know you again.”

“Me too,” Babs said. “It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.”

There was a loud crunch as Cass put another cracker in her mouth, looking bemused. Tim wondered what she was reading from Dick and Babs’ body language. Bruce sipped his champagne with an expression of bliss.

Meanwhile, Gordon looked between the two brightly dressed vigilantes with growing horror. "Barbara, sweetheart, I'm sure Dick has a busy schedule—"

"Nonsense, I always have time for old friends!" Dick laughed. "Especially friends like Babs.”

By friends, Tim assumed he meant ex-girlfriend turned coworker/family-adjacent figure. It was a weird relationship, but a good one. Tim was just confused why there was *kissing* involved now. Even if Dick trusted someone, letting their teeth so close to his jugular was a bad idea. Barbara too, what was she thinking?

"You charmer, you were so different in high school. I feel like I don't even know you anymore," Barbara said, slapping Dick's arm. "You have too many secret sides of yourself."

Dick ran a hand down her arm. "Well, maybe I'll let you in on some of them. I've been talking to your dad more recently, and he's said a lot of great things about honesty in relationships. I think I'll take his advice. After all, there's no way I could hide *anything* from you."

Dick looked up at Gordon and smirked in a way that only be described as diabolical. Tim was suddenly grateful that face had never been turned on him. It promised suffering and karma.

"I don't think my advice applies to this," Gordon said through gritted teeth. "It was more general. Right, Brucie?"

Bruce sipped his champagne. There was a glint in his eye that Tim recognized: the Bullshit Enabler, which was why his civilian cover was an idiot playboy. Bruce *loved* messing with people. And this? This was prime opportunity to do just that.

"Nonsense, Jim, Dickie means well. Besides, I'm always excited for the family to grow more. Right, kids?"

"Dick and Babs get married?" Cass said, cocking her head to the side. "Have kids?"

Tim was about to protest out of principle, but then had a vision of tiny Babs and Dick hybrid children breaking chandeliers and firewalls.

"I fully support this," Tim said. Any excuse for more of his favorite humans was good in his book. Instant hoard members, get. "When's the wedding?"

“Wedding? No weddings!” Gordon said, looking on in alarm as a couple reporters started making notes.

“Not yet anyway,” Dick said, and Babs giggled again.

Tim rubbed goosebumps off his arm. New weakness discovered; Dick’s “sexy voice” caused an allergic reaction. Avoid at all costs.

“They grow up so fast,” Bruce said happily. Then he smirked. “Say, Barbara, darling, you still don’t play those fancy coding games, do you? I’m working on a . . . night project and it has me stumped. If you and Dick will be spending time together, perhaps you could lend a hand.”

Babs straightened her glasses and smiled. “Of course, Bruce. I wouldn’t mind at all. You’re pretty hopeless with technology.”

“Completely,” Bruce lied through his teeth. “Have I ever showed you our basement? It’s full of old junk I don’t know how to use. Maybe you could put it to better use than me.”

Gordon turned to him in horror, then back to Barbara. “Sweetie, you don’t have to. In fact, you really shouldn’t—“

Dick reached out and squeezed Barbara’s hand. “Aw, Commish, you wouldn’t deprive us of Babs, would you? She’s the honey to my cheerios.”

“Her name,” Gordon ground out, “Is Barbara.”

“Oh, please, Dad,” Babs laughed, “Dick can call me whatever he wants.”

That seemed to be the last straw for Gordon. He grabbed Dick by the collar and dragged him into the corner, barking about needing a “private word.” The crowd sighed as their entertainment was tabled and began to disperse. Even Gotham’s most notorious gossips weren’t willing to listen in on

the police commissioner's argument with a Wayne. That was asking for a lawsuit. The Channel 10 camera man muttered something about his OTP dreams coming true before darting off to find a new story, looking very pleased with the footage he'd gotten of Dick and Babs kissing.

"This fun," Cass said. "I like chaos."

"Me too, sweetheart, me too," Bruce said, taking another sip of his champagne.

"Thanks for playing along, Bruce," Babs said, watching Gordon gesture violently at Dick in the corner, who looked like he was having the time of his life. "We've been planning this since the bird incident, but it's going even better than I imagined."

"Anytime," Bruce said, fixing his tie. "Pranks are good for family bonding."

Cass leaned over the back of Babs' wheelchair. "New sister?"

Babs patted Cass's head. "Pretend new sister only. Dick likes pranks and I like giving my dad gray hair, so it's a win-win."

Cass looked from Barbara to Dick, then shrugged. "Not pretend to me. Made for each other."

"Why dating though? There have to be better ways to make Gordon hate life," Tim said, askance. "You said that romance went the way of the Titanic, and that the throes of young love would die under the summer sun!"

They'd broken up when Dick was still Robin and Tim had photographic evidence that Dick had been a melancholy mess for weeks. Empty cartons of Ben & Jerry's littered his patrol routes and he'd despaired over his romantic woes with an alarming number of confused rogues.

"It did, but Dad doesn't know that," Babs said gleefully. "As far as he knows, I've been blinded by Dick's charm and money. It's payback for him constantly asking when I'm going to settle down. Dick may be in the spotlight, but this is *my* master plan."

Yeah, that sounded like Babs.

"Platonic romance is the best of both worlds, Timmy. Remember that," Babs said.

Tim would remember that it was stupid and weird. There were so many better ways to make Gordon regret becoming a cop, starting with YouTube prank compilations and ending with Your Mom jokes. Fake dating wasn't even in the ballpark. He retracted every nice thing he said about their planning prowess.

"This prank is so gross," he said.

"No, it's hilarious," Babs said. "I feel like the main character of a K-drama."

Apparently, she also loved those cringy TV shows, just like Dick. *Ew.*

"Stop giving me that judgy look and tell me what they're saying," Babs said, nudging him with her elbow. "Come on, use your super senses."

"Don't debase me, I'm not a *super*," Tim said, but pricked his ears for Dick and Gordon's conversation.

It was a shovel talk and also a promise to never approve Dick's transfer to Gotham if he was just going to chase skirts with Gordon's "precious little girl."

"Aw, but Jimmy," Dick said, smile all teeth, "that sounds like discrimination based on my personal life. You wouldn't let that cloud your judgment, would you? Imagine if word got out that you denied the GCPD a detective like me just because I'm dating your daughter. That's not something an upstanding officer like you would do, is it?"

"You're *not* dating—"

“Not *yet,* but I think I can change that after a couple weeks. Barbara is a woman of culture, and I happen to be really good at French. It’s all in the tongue, you see—“

Tim shuddered and stopped listening. He’d forgotten how gross Dick’s playboy act could be. Tim needed to bleach his brain; maybe one of the staff had some cleaning supplies he could pour into his ears?

“Well?” Babs said. Cass and Bruce leaned in as well, blatantly curious.

Gordon was now telling Dick all the places in Gotham he’d hide his body if he touched a hair on Babs’ head, and Dick replying that he knew twice as many places to get a moment alone with a pretty girl. Meanwhile, Bruce’s rich associates were circling the Waynes like vultures, probably to ask about why Dick and Babs had been sucking face on live TV.

“This hoard is a nightmare,” Tim said, then turned and left.

“Wait, Tim, what did they say?” Babs said. “Get back here!”

Tim shook his head and ran. Once he found a dark corner he pulled out his phone to text Bart. He needed to talk to someone normal for a change. It sucked that the rest of his hoard was so obsessed with romance, even if it was for a prank.

***

The rest of the gala was chaos, but not Tim’s usual brand of chaos. It was weird chaos, unfamiliar chaos, a romantic *tizzy* of chaos.

Dick and Babs flirted like they’d been spiked with Ivy’s pollen, Gordon stalked behind them making sure they kept things PG (which failed when the clock struck midnight and they kissed to welcome in the new year), Cass and Bruce were swarmed by reporters again, and the Young Justice

group didn't answer any of his texts, so Tim was forced to babysit his humans and navigate the strange social conventions of the rich.

Babysitting meant humoring reporters, reminding them of Cass's perfect and wonderful existence, and shrugging when they asked if he knew Dick and Babs were dating. He also threw champagne on a news crew camera, threatened to bite an investor from Metropolis, and got a brave human to eat a canape coated in grape juice and topped with caviar. (He didn't throw up, which was impressive.)

By the end of the night, Dick and Babs were making out in a corner again, all of Gotham knew Cass had been found living in Bruce's attic, and Gordon was . . . Tim looked around. Gordon was gone. Huh, weird. Maybe he'd been called away for something work-related.

Tim pulled out his Batphone to see if anything had pinged. Babs taking the night off meant that only her automatic programs were running, but things looked normal, aside from a minor altercation at Arkham between some employees and the director, who'd had a psychotic break.

He scrolled a bit further down the alert message. . . there had been an OSHA worker involved? And a bomb? Those two things seemed counterintuitive. Then again, it *was* Gotham. Tim could see the city's Health and Safety Department using high explosives.

Tim shook his head and put his phone away. There were many mysteries in this strange, humanized world, and he didn't care enough to unravel all of them this second. He'd look into it tomorrow morning when his brain wasn't going to melt out of his ears.

"You ready to head out, champ?" Bruce asked, a hand on Tim's back.

Tim leaned into the touch and nodded, fighting back a yawn. Cass slumped against Bruce's other shoulder, tiredly playing Four Swords on her DS as she tried to keep her eyes open.

"Yeah," Tim said. "Let's go home."

***

“Tonight was fun, though less chaotic than I hoped,” Babs said, relaxing into the backseat of the Wayne car. Dick sidled in next to her after he folded her wheelchair and put it in the trunk, eyeliner smudged and several rhinestones missing from his suit. There was also a fresh hickey on his neck, courtesy of Babs. “Next time, we’ll have to cause a bigger scandal.”

Bruce grunted in agreement as he pulled the car out of the parking space. Tim was finally understanding where Jason got his dramatics from.

“Even so, Gordon’s face was priceless,” Dick said, grinning like a loon. “I can’t wait until my civilian ID takes a turn for the Brucie Wayne. He’s going to *hate* me.”

“And that’s . . . good?” Tim said, glancing back at them from the passenger seat.

Babs patted Dick’s shoulder and chuckled. “Dad’s basically asking for it. Work has him wound tighter than piano wire around a gangster’s neck. I’d be a bad daughter *not* to take advantage of that.”

Tim slumped against Cass and yawned. “Well, mission accomplished. I think every reporter in Gotham got a picture of you two making out by the chocolate fountain.”

And the camera. And the ice sculpture. And basically anywhere public enough to cause a scene.

BILLIONAIRE PLAYBOY DATES POLICE COMMISSIONER’S DAUGHTER would be in the headlines tomorrow, without a doubt. Tim had bet Cass five Oreos that Vicki Vale would do a double spread of both it and Cass’s first gala to capitalize on the Wayne Family Drama.

(Cass took the bet like a sucker, but Tim knew he’d just give the cookies back to her after he won.)

“Why do you think we used tongue?” Babs said. “We really had to sell it.”

Tim fake gagged. Cass joined in, a human after his own heart, and the car was full of the sound of retching.

“Glad to see Gordon isn’t the only one suffering,” Dick said. “Trust me, this is nothing. You should’ve seen Bruce back in his playboy heyday. The things I saw . . .”

Bruce snapped his fingers from the front seat. “You signed an NDA, stop talking.”

“Stop silencing my trauma!”

They pulled onto the highway, heading back to Bristol. Traffic was heavy despite the late hour. New Year’s was bustling the way only a massive city like Gotham could manage.

“It’s too bad Gordon had to leave early,” Tim said, refusing to fall asleep when Cass leaned forward and started running her hand through his hair. “He only gave you one shovel talk.”

Dick shrugged. “Yeah, well you know how it goes. We’d hoped he would’ve thrown hands, but there’s always some kind of emergency in Gotham. He was probably chomping at the bit to leave.”

“I’ll look at my systems when I get home,” Babs said. “It was probably nothing—the usual New Year’s robberies or something—but it’s always safe to double check.”

“There was a blip at Arkham earlier, maybe it was that?” Tim yawned.

Bruce grunted, fingers tightening around the wheel. The jovial atmosphere became more tense.

“I’ll investigate that one first,” Babs said. “If it was just a blip, then none of the inmates escaped, but we can never be too careful.”

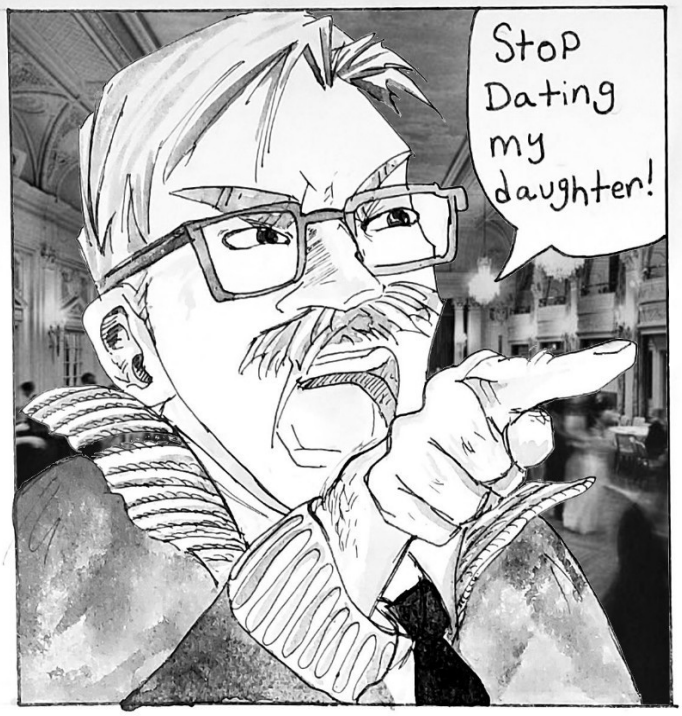
Tim sank deeper into his chair, blinking heavily. He saw Babs rub her knee in the rearview mirror, and Dick squeeze her hand. He looked pensive, just like her.

Tim didn’t like seeing them upset. Good thing the Joker was dead; he’d never hurt any of them ever again.

Bruce turned the corner, focusing on driving home rather than toward the asylum. As he went, snow pelted against the windows in a hypnotic swirl.

The radio fizzled, turned to a news station instead of Bruce’s usual classic rock station. Tim barely registered the murmur of conversation between his hoard as they theorized what happened at Arkham.

The road was gentle and he was tired, and everybody he loved was safe. It was impossible to stay awake knowing that, and Tim lost the battle against his eyes, letting sleep lull him into its embrace.


Stop Dating my daughter!

You know what? I'm gonna date her even harder.

Really Dick, in front of my food?
That's my boy!
?
LIVE BAT REACTION

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, in Arkham (continued):

Director: This has all been a major misunderstanding, officer. Gary didn't mean any harm, he's just Like That.
Butch Lesbian: He tried to blow us up! IN THE JOKER'S CELL! You're lucky I'm a state champion boxer, someone could have seriously gotten hurt.
Secretary *under her breath*: That's so sexy. Can you pin ME down in the ring?
Butch Lesbian: Anytime.
Security Guard: Guys, stop flirting. Gary is still unconscious.
GCPD officer: I called an ambulance. Now, quick question; if this is the Joker's cell, where is he?
Gary:
Security Guard:
Director:
Butch Lesbian:
Secretary:
Director: So about that . . .

Later:

Gordon: An emergency? Paul, I just got home from the most traumatizing public event of my life. Whatever it is can wai--WHO IS MISSING?!

Tonight is not a good night for a lot of people.

On the bright side, Secretary and Butch Lesbian's first date is Friday, and both are confident it'll be better than this.

Disco! In the Panic Room

Chapter Summary

Revelations are had.

Chapter Notes

This chapter gave me so much grief via imposter syndrome, but RavenGranger came in clutch and rescued me from my spiral using her amazing beta-reader powers. Thank you, Raven!

I also went ahead and wrote like . . . 10k more of this story over the weekend, so hopefully the next update will be soon, haha.

BTW, the chapter title is based on a song of the same name (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZWb0vbKaHI&ab_channel=BugHunter) which is a great bop about perfectionism. Totally recommend it ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ride back to the manor was uneventful. All Tim remembered was being lifted out of the car and biting whoever had the gall to pick him up. Someone (Babs?) had laughed, and there was some talking about protocols and computer programs, and then Tim was snuggling into his blankets as the heater warmed his room up to delicious coziness.

He woke up groggy and well-rested, which was in high contrast to his usual sleep-deprived state.

Tim wandered downstairs in his pjs, hair a halo, and flopped onto the couch next to Cass while the TV played the morning news. The weather forecast was Cloudy, Cloudy, and Polluted Beyond Belief. So, normal.

“Tired?” she asked.

“Yup,” Tim yawned. “Galas are the worst.”

She patted his head in agreement. “Cake was tasty though.”

Tim shrugged. “It could have been better.”

Chocolate lava cake was gooey deliciousness, but it needed more crunchy insects to be a true culinary masterpiece.

“Where are Jason and Babs?” Tim asked, pulling a throw blanket over them both.

“Home,” Cass said.

“Home?”

Tim distinctly remembered Babs planning to stay the night to make Gordon angry. Tim didn’t know *why* that’d make Gordon mad, but the commissioner’s trigger finger had been twitching when Dick brought it up. Tim figured it was that human guy thing about wanting to control where people slept again. It was such a weird hang-up.

“Jason leave at night to talk to minions about crime,” Cass said. “Babs leave to use her own computer. Says Bruce bad at org-an-izing his.”

Tim hummed. That made sense. Jason probably booked it once Alfred went to bed and the snacks disappeared. Meanwhile, Babs and Bruce were both neurotic about their filing systems. One would think they’d be similar, but noooooo, they had to be “different” and “distinct” and equally annoying to learn. Tim would know; he bounced between both for his coding classes and vigilante work, and it was the *worst.*

Cass broke Tim out of his reverie by poking him in the ribs. “Hungry, get me food.”

“No, I’m too comfy.”

She poked him again.

“Cass, *stop.* I’m trying to hibernate.”

“No sleep. Do my bidding. Get me snacks.”

“Forget it. I’m on a hunger strike. Do your own hunting.” Tim said. His stomach was acting up; he knew that if he had food, it would make him sick. It’d probably be a few days before he ate anything. Stupid dragon metabolism, being all weird again.

“Have little brother for that. Hunt for me.”

Tim went boneless as she tried to roll him off the couch. The cushions were too comfy to abandon, even for Cass.

Dick stumbled into the room a moment later, dressed in a pair of hot pink sweatpants and a silk tank top.

“Ah, violence already,” Dick said. “The joys of siblinghood.”

“Not siblings, hoard,” Tim said. “A *bad* hoard. Stop rebelling against me, Cass. I’m *your* lord and master.”

She pushed him off the couch. “No, you my minion. Now get food.”

Tim stuck his tongue out at her, daring her to make him. Her pressure point skills were mighty, but those made him go limp. They wouldn’t help her now.

“Please don’t destroy the manor,” Dick said. “Jason has dibs on that.”

Jason claimed Wayne Manor was a symptom of late-stage capitalism and had to be razed to the ground. He usually retracted that statement when Tim offered to do it, which was a relief. Tim would rather not have to find a new nest.

“We won’t,” Cass said, dodging a swipe of Tim’s claws and whacking him on the shoulder. Tim hissed and tried to bite her.

He wasn’t trying to break skin, just make a point. Unfortunately, Cass was good at dodging. She gave him an elbow to the ribs, which sent him falling against the coffee table. There was a crunch as the tabletop cracked.

“Yay for murder siblings. Don’t worry, Cass, I’ll grab you something,” Dick said, mussing her hair. “Alfred’s got errands and his embroidery club today, so I’m on kitchen duty. What’ll you have; Lucky Charms? Life? Frosted Flakes? We have more than enough cereal to go around.”

Tim thought about the spare room they’d shoved all of Dick’s birthday cereal in. It’d probably last until the next zombie apocalypse.

“Lucky Charms,” Cass said. “Timmy gets Trix, because they’re for kids.”

“I am *not* a kid—“

Dick left them to their scuffle. Bruce wandered into the room a few minutes later, searching for his newspaper.

“Does Alfred know you broke the coffee table?” Bruce asked.

Cass and Tim froze.

Bruce sighed. “Come on, dining room. We’ll do damage control later.”

Tim rolled to his feet and obeyed for once in his life, busy planning how he'd escape Alfred's death glare for the thousandth time. It wasn't *his* fault Wayne Manor was full of breakable heirlooms. Furniture was meant to be chewed on, burned, and torn to pieces. Everybody knew that.

Dick balanced a tray of cereal on his feet and handstand-walked into the dining room to give it to them. Cass thought it was hilarious, but Bruce and Tim didn't even blink; Dick did stuff like that all the time.

"You're not eating?" Dick asked Tim. "I even added extra marshmallows for you."

"Not hungry," Tim said. He pushed the bowl away and face-planted onto the table. "Food is evil."

"Sorry to hear that, kiddo," Dick took a big bite of his Honeycombs. "Let me know if anything changes, okay?"

Tim made a vaguely human-sounding noise and tried to fall asleep again. It was hard to do when his face was squished against the table, but he persisted.

He'd just started drifting off to dreamland when Dick's phone started blasting Britney Spears at full volume.

"Sorry," Dick said, interrupting the chorus of *"Oops . . . I Did It Again."* "Yeah, Babs? Speaker. Uh, sure, what's—"

"*Turn on the news right now!"*

Dick almost dropped his phone into his cereal.

Tim shook himself away and followed the Waynes as they sprinted back to the living room, curiosity sparked.

The TV was on, just as Cass had left it. A middle-aged TV human was on it, face queasy as he read off a piece of paper an intern had just given him.

"This just in. The Joker is missing from Arkham Asylum!" He said. *"Sources confirm that the Director of Arkham Asylum covered up the man's disappearance. The Joker's escape is estimated have occurred as far back as Halloween—"*

Dick and Bruce made identical, gut-punched noises. Cass's eyes narrowed as she honed in on the word "Joker," fingers curling into fists.

Tim cocked his head and blinked slowly.

A cover-up?

Well, that explained things. Tim had wondered why Joker's vanishing act hadn't made the news. Go figure that it was just Gotham being Gotham.

"The Joker is . . . no, no no no no," Dick muttered. "This is bad."

Bruce made another wheezing, upset sound, still at a loss for words, then grabbed both Tim and Cass and hoisted them up under his arms. He was out of the parlor and down the hall before Tim could blink, Dick right on his heels.

"B, what are you doing?" Tim began, wriggling to try to touch the floor. It didn't work. Why did Bruce have to be so *tall?* "Put me down!"

Cass was zero help. She was limp, unbothered by their capture.

"You two are staying inside," Bruce said as he headed toward a seldom-used wing of the manor. "You are grounded until we catch that lunatic. No Robin, no vigilantism, no vanishing acts. You're staying right where I can see you."

“But I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay, just stay calm,” Dick said, the epitome of *not* calm. “I’m going to call Jason, and if he doesn’t pick up, I’m going to kidnap him.”

Wait, kidnapping? The same thing they always told Tim *not* to do?

“What is wrong with you two?” Tim asked, debating transforming and squishing them both until he got answers.

“Confused!” Cass said, still not bothering to escape. Tim *knew* she could free them both if she wanted to. Curse her implicit trust of Bruce.

“We’re keeping you safe from the Joker. There’s nothing wrong with that at all,” Dick said.

They reached the end of the hall, where the reinforced titanium door to the manor’s panic room waited.

Tim and Cass were thrown inside, right onto the mega bean bags Bruce ordered from IKEA a year ago. Tim stumbled to his feet as the door was slammed shut, followed by the lock engaging.

“Don’t worry, guys! You’ll be fine. Snacks are in the mini-fridge!” Dick yelled from the other side, then he and Bruce *left.*

Tim and Cass stared at each other in bewilderment.

“Is this . . . start of horror movie?” Cass asked.

“No, worse,” Tim said, flopping onto the bean bag. “This is how they show they *care.”*

***

Tim hadn't told anybody that the Joker was dead. That would have defeated the purpose of *killing him quietly.*

Being locked in a panic room almost made him regret it. Not the murder, obviously, but the secrecy.

He'd assumed that the Waynes would investigate his disappearance, then eventually make it a cold case after a couple of years. Being held captive like he was about to be Stockholm-syndromed by his own hoard was not on his radar. Tim had gotten sloppy. This wasn't even out of character for Bruce.

"I can't believe I let my guard down," Jason said, now also in the panic room. "This is the last time I trust Dick when he says he wants to play Smash Bros."

"There, there." Cass patted Jason's head and went back to her Etch A Sketch.

Jason grumbled something about becoming the next Mrs. Rochester, then started telling Tim about *The Yellow Wastepaper.*

"Wallpaper, Tim. It's The Yellow *Wallpaper.* And it's not only a fitting allegory for my life, but a short story that revolutionized how women's mental health was perceived in the early—"

Tim's eyes glazed over. Discussions about nineteenth-century feminist literature weren't his thing.

He looked longingly at the door. Janet could probably get through titanium, but Tim needed at least one more molt before his claws were that sharp. So far, steel was his limit, and thus he was trapped.

It'd been at least three hours since they'd all been cooped up together, and there was no end to Jason's literature rant in sight.

Tim wondered how long it'd take for them to all go insane.

***

Turns out, they just had to wait until Alfred got back from his embroidery club that afternoon. The butler was *not* impressed when he found out Bruce and Dick had locked them all up in a kid-friendly padded cell. He had the driest expression Tim had ever seen, which was saying *a lot.*

Alfred was even less impressed when he found out Tim, Cass, and Jason's way of coping with boredom had been to slice open a bean bag and count how many foam peanuts were inside it.

Tim and Cass may have also stuffed Jason into the bean bag and tried to sew him inside, but that was neither here nor there. (Turns out literary rants weren't Cass's thing either. They'd ganged up on Jason to make him stop.)

"The manor is not a cat tree for you to claw at," Alfred said. "Do desist in your efforts to prove otherwise, Master Tim."

"We were imprisoned! What did you expect us to do?" Tim said. "It was boring in there. I didn't even have any of my rocks to organize."

This was all Bruce and Dick's fault for not providing proper, dragon-approved activities in the panic room. Tim had found an amazing collection of citrine on eBay last week and was still in the middle of polishing it. That would have made his stint in Hoard Jail way more pleasant.

"You know my thoughts on damaging household property," Alfred said sternly. "Now get your brother out of there so I can repair it."

"Not a brother," Tim grumbled, but tore off the duct tape so Jason fell out. "He's hoard. It's *different."*

Alfred raised an eyebrow, unmoved.

“If I’m being forced to belong to this insane family, so are you,” Jason said as he picked packing peanuts out of his hair. “You’re my brother whether you like it or not, Timbo.”

“Mutiny from my own hoard!” Tim gasped. “Mom was right, I should’ve stopped at none.”

Of course, she usually said that about him, not her hoard, but details, details.

Jason flung a handful of packing peanuts at Tim. Tim flung an armful back, and then Cass joined in. Soon the air was full of shredded bean bag innards.

Alfred sighed and left them to it, dragging the bean bag carcass away for proper burial. By the time Bruce and Dick came home from patrol, the panic room was trashed.

***

Dick and Bruce got back from Arkham that evening, pale-faced and upset. They gathered everyone in the Batcave to explain how the Joker escaped Arkham *months* ago without anybody noticing, and to panic.

Mostly to panic.

Alfred didn’t even *try* to lecture them about locking half the hoard into the panic room after that announcement. He just sank into a chair and stared into space with violence in his eyes. Cass sat next to him, looking much the same after they told her how the Joker killed Jason back in the day.

Tim sighed and made a note to chastise his silly hoard himself later. He had to do everything around here.

“Wait, that’s why they threw us into the panic room?” Jason whispered to Tim. They were sitting next to each other by one of the training mats in the Batcave while Bruce and Dick continued to spiral.

“Uh-huh.”

“Tim, we were in there for eight hours. Why the hell didn’t you mention this earlier?”

Tim shrugged. “I thought you knew.”

Also, Jason was a detective. He should have figured it out. Tim was so tired of explaining stuff. His humans needed to keep up with the program.

Also, Cass hadn’t said anything either. Way to place the blame, Jason.

“As you can see,” Bruce said, pointing at the latest slide in his I’m-not-panicking-you’re-panicking PowerPoint, “this is the evidence we’ve gathered so far, which indicates there was a struggle—”

Oh, those were photos of leftover blood spatters in Joker’s cell. Oops. Tim thought he and Jason had been thorough, but clearly they’d been too focused on the murder itself, not the cleanup. Tim would have to keep that in mind for the future, in case there was another criminal he needed to kill to avenge his hoard.

The only bright side was that the cell was half exploded from a homemade bomb made by Arkham’s janitor gone rogue, so analyzing how the door had originally been broken into was a no-go. Tim was surprised Bruce even had this much data from the crime scene.

“The GCPD is on high alert for clown activity,” Dick said. “Babs said Gordon is DEFCON 1, for obvious reasons—“

“Cool,” Jason said. He stood up and stretched. “You guys keep me updated on that. I’m going back home.”

Jason got two steps before Dick was clinging to him like a koala, professionalism abandoned to the winds.

“No! I just got my baby zombie brother back, we’re *not* losing you again! Why aren’t you worried, Jason? He killed you. Crushed you like a chihuahua under a sixteen-wheeler. Made you push daisies, toasted you into a burnt slice of bread—”

Jason struggled to escape the death grip Dick had on him. “Pretty sure Joker didn’t get newspapers in his cell. He probably doesn’t even know there’s a second Red Hood, I’m not on his hit list—*seriously, Dick, I can’t breathe. Stop—”*

Bruce put a hand on Tim’s shoulder, looking rattled, and did nothing to rescue Jason from Dick’s overly-aggressive physical affection. “It’s going to be okay, kids. We’ll find him. Everything will be okay. I promise he won’t get any of you.”

Ew, concern.

“Why are you guys worried? I can take the Joker,” Tim said. In fact, he already had. “I survived my mom, he doesn’t scare me.”

Especially since he was dead.

“Of course we’re worried!” Dick said. He now had Jason in a joint lock. “Tim, remember our lesson on lasting trauma? *This is that lesson.”*

Tim nodded slowly. He’d hoped their issues would die when the Joker did, but that was asking too much. Human psyches were weird.

“Indeed, which is why we are concerned. Master Jason, this goes for you as well. Your murderer could be anywhere,” Alfred said, rising from his seat. “Surely you understand our worry, even though Master Timothy struggles with the concept.”

“I resent that,” Tim said, even though it was true.

“Oh please, this changes nothing. That clown’s *existence* is the problem, not his escape status. Putting him back in Arkham won’t make me feel any better,” Jason said. He nerve-striked Dick’s arm, but still couldn’t get free. “Chillax, guys, I have a great handle on my trauma. I’ll just pop a bullet into his skull if I see him near the alley, problem solved. I’ve got this.”

“You do not ‘got’ this,” Bruce said. “All of you are staying off the streets until we catch him. Underestimating the Joker never ends well.”

“What?” Tim squawked. Forget the Joker, underestimating *Tim* never went well. Wouldn’t his humans ever learn? He couldn’t be contained in the manor. They’d tried that before, and no way was Tim staying indoors when the Joker wasn’t even a real threat.

There was a loud thud as Jason judo-flipped Dick onto the ground, then collapsed so he could breathe. Dick’s octopus hugs were getting harder to escape.

“Stay inside? When there are *crimes to commit?*” Jason said. “B, it’s like you don’t even know me.”

“It’s just a safety protocol—“

“Safety, my ass. This is ridiculous. If you really cared, you’d just shoot the scumbag. I’m out of here.”

Jason made another break for his motorcycle. Dick body-slammed him before he could get to it, screaming about saving his frosted mini-wheat from a second death.

“I’m a successful, mass-murdering crime-lord, I don’t need your help, Dickface,” Jason said. “Tim, help! Get him off me!”

Tim cocked his head. Maybe he should tell them the Joker was dead? His hoard was very emotional and it’d get everybody to calm down. Hmm, but that’d mean admitting he killed him, and *that* meant Morality lectures and Bruce’s sad face. Not worth it.

“Nah, you’re on your own,” he said, then sat on the ground and did absolutely nothing to help.

Jason looked at Tim in betrayal. Tim stuck his tongue out at him; this was revenge for letting Dick take Tim back to school that one time. Take that, Jason.

***

In the end, it took Alfred to stop Bruce and Dick from putting Jason back in the panic room. He got Jason to agree to stay the rest of the weekend at the manor to “soothe an old man’s worries” and assured them that his shotgun would deter any Joker goons from breaking in.

Cass and Tim were convinced to take the night off patrol for the same reasons. Tim was about to protest, then clocked how twitchy his hoard was. If he snuck out there was an 80% chance one of them would have a breakdown, so he nodded and agreed to behave for the next 12 hours.

Bruce and Dick sighed in relief, then turned back to the Batcomputer to figure out how the Joker escaped, grumbling about corrupted evidence and their lack of leads.

Tim batted his eyes and kept quiet. He’d been very thorough while erasing his Arkham code. They wouldn’t find a thing.

Cass sat on the sidelines, eating her favorite cookies, eyes squinted suspiciously at Tim and Jason the entire night.

***

To say things were tense was an understatement.

Gotham was a kicked hornet’s nest, and everybody and their grandma was ready to skip town or blow up a bank at the first sign of clownery. Babs locked herself into her Clocktower for forty-eight

hours to hack every camera possible, and Bruce was spending every waking moment scanning camera footage from Halloween.

Jason made it his mission to convince Bruce to reconsider his stand on murder. If the man who killed his son was loose, wasn't it his duty to end him once and for all?

Bruce got a pained look in his eyes and gave Jason his "Without morals I'm a monster" speech three times. Jason didn't take it well. He escaped the manor while Tim was at school, with a vow never to return on pain of redeath. His last words before he went was that Bruce cared more about his stuffy ethics than Jason, which meant all his talk about family was a lie.

Bruce was very upset about that. He locked himself in the Batcave to mope with Shakespearean level of dramatics. Like son like father.

Tim steered clear until his favorite human wasn't about to cry every two minutes, then made it his mission to throw red herrings into the search by pointing out random details that ultimately didn't matter. He did his best to pretend to be worried and hissed whenever the Joker's name was mentioned so that nobody would catch on. Everybody was still upset about Jason leaving the manor, so it seemed to do the trick.

Mostly.

"You suss," Cass said, appearing from the shadows in the kitchen to glare at him. "Lying."

Tim kept making his tuna peanut-butter sandwich. It was five a.m., and nobody else was awake. "I lie about tons of stuff, Cass. You need to be more specific."

She crossed her arms. "You and Jason not worried. Bodies . . . weird. Hiding something."

Tim licked the peanut-butter spoon and leaned against the counter. "That's good to know."

He'd been wondering when she'd confront him. Cass's body-reading skills meant he couldn't hide *everything* from her, but Tim wasn't worried.

“Learn your secret,” Cass said. “Hiding will not work.”

“We’ll see about that,” Tim said. He held up his plate. “Sandwich?”

Cass wrinkled her nose and vanished back into the darkness. Tim shrugged. There was nothing he could do about Cass’s unfair lie-detection skills, but she couldn’t prove anything on her own. The rules of detective-work meant she needed physical proof, so there was nothing to worry about.

For a couple more days, at least.

***

It was a peaceful night in the Batcave. Dick was on patrol, Jason was still AWOL, and Cass was helping Alfred make oatmeal raisin cookies, so it was just Tim and Bruce down there. Tim was working on personal projects and Bruce was analyzing the Joker’s file for the hundredth time.

“Tim, where were you on Halloween?” Bruce asked, breaking the silence.

Tim looked up from his laptop, where he was modifying one of Barbara’s tracking programs to facially recognize Young Justice in their civilian guises. “Spending time with Jason. We were bonding, remember?”

Bruce steepled his fingers. “What kind of bonding?”

Tim glanced over. Bruce was pulled up data on the Joker’s escape; on one screen there was a ten-hour window between the security guard’s rounds. On the other screen, Tim’s missing trackers that night were flagged.

“We went to the docks,” Tim said. “I gave Jason a hug and cried a lot, then fell asleep. I woke up in his apartment the next day. It’s in the report I gave you.”

Bruce pulled a face. Tim's "report" of that night was copying and pasting "JASON JASON JASON" 5,000 times into a Word document and riddling it with emojis. At the very end was a brief summary of their reunion, but Tim had prioritized how he'd felt at the time. It was an extremely valuable study on draconic affection that plenty of people would probably kill to get their hands on, but it was a pretty terrible incident report. Even Tim knew that.

"You have several hours unaccounted for that night," Bruce said. "Where were you, precisely?"

Tim leaned back and pushed his chair away from the desk. It spun in a lazy circle until Tim set his feet down and dragged it to a stop. "Why do you care?"

Bruce set his jaw. "You know why."

The three rules stood unspoken between them.

Tim widened his eyes. "You think I killed the Joker? You said he broke out!"

"I'm entertaining all possibilities."

"Well, there's nothing funny about this," Tim said with a frown. "You told me not to kill anyone, B. Where is the faith?"

Bruce stood up and loomed over Tim, channeling all his Dad Energy. "You have the motive and the window of opportunity, Tim, and you hate my rules."

Tim hummed. His close calls with homicide were well-known, but he'd hoped it would have taken Bruce longer to put Tim on the suspect list. Tim had been careful never to mention how much he loathed the Joker in front of the man. The closest he'd gotten was their conversation/hugfest about following Batman's rules last year, and that had been about concepts more than anything else.

"But what about the means?" Tim asked. "You haven't finished filling out my Clue card, B."

Bruce grabbed the top of the chair and spun it to face him. Tim stared up at him innocently.

“Don’t play games with me, Tim. You and Jason vanished during the same timeframe as Joker’s time of death, and only a skilled hacker would be able to get past Barbara’s firewall. One familiar with her code.”

Bruce was glowering something fierce, grinding his teeth and everything.

Tim kicked his feet. “I’m flattered you think so highly of me, B, but Arkham is harder to hack than the Pentagon. Even I’m not that good. Do you even have any proof it was me?”

Bruce’s jaw squared further. “Based on the circumstances—”

“You don’t,” Tim said. “And I’m innocent until proven guilty. You shouldn’t shoot first and make theories later.”

“You made a promise to me. No killing people—”

“I know! I haven’t broken it.”

The Joker wasn’t a person. He’d been an amalgamation of evil, therefore the promise didn’t extend to him. Besides, Jason’s revenge had dibs.

“You don’t even have any real evidence,” Tim said, crossing his arms. “I’ve been trying *so hard* to follow your rules, but I leave for five minutes and you think I ignored and broke all of them? Come on, Bruce!”

If Tim hadn’t done exactly that, the accusation would have stung.

“You know, I don’t know why I even try,” Tim continued. “You humans are all the same, morality-obsessed jerks at the end of the day. It’s like you don’t even know how hard this is for me.”

He hunched in on himself and glared at the floor. True to form, Bruce knelt next to him, looking apologetic.

“I’m following my leads,” Bruce said. “This isn’t a slight against you, Tim, but you understand why I’m concerned. You haven’t had reliable self-control of late.”

Tim snorted. “My self-control is *fine.”*

Nobody except the Joker was dead, Gotham’s stray animal population was taken care of, and revitalizing the areas he’d burned down with Jason was going smoothly. A happy ending all around. Tim deserved a medal.

“Just tell me what happened on Hall0ween, and I’ll drop it,” Bruce said. “If you’re innocent, you have nothing to hide.”

Tim narrowed his eyes. “No, I don’t think I will.”

Bruce took a deep breath. “Tim—”

“If you’re so certain I did it, then *prove* it,” Tim said. “After all, a great detective like yourself will be able to find tangible proof, won’t you? If I’m *so* guilty.”

“That’s not what I—“

Tim closed his laptop, hopped to his feet, and walked over to the basement stairs. He was done with this conversation.

“Is this really how you want to do things?” Bruce called up to him. “You’ll only make things more difficult for yourself.”

Tim flipped him the bird. It was time to remind Bruce that while Tim was happy to obey him, that was only when it was convenient. He wasn't going to put up with this from his hoard, even though Bruce's deductions were right.

"We're going to get to the bottom of this," Bruce growled, patience paper-thin.

Ah, his sense of perfectionism was acting up. Bruce would compulsively make sure this case was under wraps, if only for his own peace of mind. Any and all evidence would be discovered, and if Tim hadn't perfectly engineered his revenge, then he'd be in hot water. Outsmarting Bruce was hard.

Luckily, Tim had years to prep for this, and just as much time as Batman's babysitter.

"Have fun, Bruce," he smiled from the top of the stairs, every inch his mother. "I'd like to see you try."

Chapter End Notes

Bruce: Babs, I think Tim killed someone.
Babs: We all think that, Bruce.
Bruce: The Joker.
Babs: Pfft, yeah right. Like he could've gotten through my firewalls.
Bruce:
Babs:
Babs: You don't think he—?
Bruce: Those coding classes may have been a bad idea.
Babs: I need to check a few things . . .

Meanwhile, in Arkham

Security Guard: So, how does it feel to be the one behind bars, Director?
Ex-Director of Arkham: Pretty great actually, I missed my padded cell. It's been a couple of years since I was last in here.
Security Guard: . . . What?
Ex-Director: I keep forgetting you were hired after Bruce Wayne paid for our security update. Gary isn't the only one who's part of our Inmate Initiative Program. I check in every couple of years for a mental health break. It's pretty nice.

Security Guard: You were deemed criminally insane, sir. This isn't a mental health break. You'll be in here indefinitely. They've already hired your replacement.
Ex-Director: Pfft, I give him six months before he quits. Trust me, I'm the only one who can run this place. They've tried to get rid of me but nobody else can make it. Once they run out of idealistic fools to fill the position, they'll put me back in my office, just like always.
Security Guard: So what, you're treating this like a vacation?
Ex-Director *kicking back with a magazine*: Yup. Who needs PTO when you've got this, am I right?
Security Guard: . . . I need to get a better job.

The Last Laugh

Chapter Summary

The search for the Joker continues.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the awesome beta, Raven! The real hero was the beta I found along the way 😁

Ironically, it took longer to write the end not than to edit the chapter. What even is this fic 🤦♀️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes, Tim wished he'd thought through the inter-species cultural differences before he'd started hoarding humans. It hadn't seemed like a big deal at the time, but given that Bruce Wayne was *the* man against murder, it was making things around the manor tense.

It wasn't rocket science; dragons loved their hoards and *nothing* else. Ergo, they did whatever they could to keep said hoard safe. There were no Geneva conventions or war crimes complicating it. Why would there be? Nothing was 'too far' when it came to protecting their treasures. Even Jack knew that Janet and Tim couldn't be talked out of lethal force if someone wanted to hurt their humans.

Bruce hadn't gotten that memo.

Bruce hadn't gotten *any* memos.

It had been several days since the conversation in the cave, and Bruce was still being Bruce: paranoid, distrusting, and neurotic. Tim normally loved those qualities, but it was irritating when they were directed at him. Just because Tim allegedly murdered someone did not give Bruce a moral high ground. The judgment and suspicion were very annoying.

Even more annoying was Bruce bringing Tim's parents into the mess on the next group Skype call. If Tim didn't adore him, Bruce would be on thin ice.

"You think Tim killed someone?" Jack said. He and Janet were in Singapore for another anthropological event, so Bruce had called them after patrol. They were in their hotel, preparing for a dinner with fellow fossil nerds, and looking very posh in their formalwear.

Bruce nodded grimly and explained the Joker situation.

Jack looked at Tim. Tim looked at him. Several years of both dragons talking about the best way to dismember the clown hung in the air between them. Janet stayed indifferent in the background, distracted with organizing a pile of pearls.

This was the hard part of Tim's plan. Jack had a strong moral code and *very clear* rules on how he expected Janet and Tim to behave, not to mention horrible, sad emotions to use against them when they didn't.

Luckily, there was one thing more powerful than Jack's moral compass: *family*.

"Nonsense, Tim would never," Jack said, turning back to Bruce. "I know we've had homicide scares, Bruce, but that's just him being playful. Janet does the same thing. You have no idea how many of our competitors I've had to save from unfortunate accidents when she gets bored. It's how they burn off all that extra energy. It's really quite adorable once you get used to it."

Janet clicked her tongue and Tim wrinkled his nose in solidarity; Jack never let them have any *fun* hobbies, and there was nothing adorable about being denied a kill.

"I know you love Tim, but the circumstantial evidence—" Bruce began.

Jack waved him off. "You need to read the PDF again, Bruce. If Tim *did* murder the Joker, he wouldn't have done it quietly. A dragon hiding their kill is ludicrous, especially if it's someone who harmed their hoard."

Tim smiled. When push came to shove, Jack Drake always chose family. It was his trademark. Even better, those Dragon lessons were paying off!

Bruce did not look as impressed. “Tim has the necessary skill set to have done this.”

“To plan out a highly specific murder-heist? Please, Bruce, be logical. His revenge would be much more public,” Jack said, lying to Batman like he did it every day. “Spending years learning to hack when he could just break through a window in dragon form is just preposterous. Dragons aren’t known for subtely. Isn’t that right, Jan?”

Janet nodded in firm agreement, even though it was a bald-faced lie. Dragons could be very sneaky when they wanted (which was why there was almost no footage of them in the wild), but nobody else needed to know that.

Jack spent the rest of the Skype call gaslighting Bruce about dragon behavior and looking so confident of Tim’s innocence that Bruce had to apologize for leaping to conclusions, and promise to reread the PDF.

And who would doubt Jack Drake? As far as the world knew, he didn’t have a deceitful bone in his body.

Tim didn’t say it often, but he really loved his dad.

***

Of course, love didn’t save Tim from a long, stern talking-to later that night.

Jack had long ago given up talking Tim out of killing the Joker, but he was still mad about Tim’s alleged foray into homicide, if only because it was further proof that Tim was slipping into bad habits.

“Bad nothing, I did what I was supposed to!” Tim said.

“Indeed, it was well executed. Jack, you are always wanting us to conceal our nature. You should be proud Timothy did so to such an extent,” Janet said. “I would not have been so patient.”

Tim pressed his hands against his face to hide his blush. Implying he was better than his mom at playing the long game was too much. Janet needed to stop, he didn’t have immunity for this level of praise.

“I know, Jan. *Trust me,* I’m well aware of that. And Tim, I’m very proud you defended your hoard, but not everything else.” Jack said. “You’re taking advantage of the Waynes’ inexperience. Don’t think I haven’t seen the incident reports they’ve sent me. I know you have better control than this, so you’re on thin ice. One more attempt to cannibalize somebody, and I’m signing us up for a canoeing trip in the Yukon and a whole summer of Human Ethics classes.”

Tim and Janet gasped. Evil, cruel human. And Jack said *they* were bad.

***

Of course, Bruce didn’t give up after that. Tim didn’t think the phrase existed in the man’s dictionary. Every day he made comments to try to trick Tim into confessing to his crimes, and glared at him in frustration when Tim didn’t fall for the bait.

Basically, Bruce was *petty.*

But so was Tim.

“I can’t believe you think Tim killed the Joker!” Dick said to Bruce (again) in the Batcave. “We don’t even know if the clown is dead. Are you trying to undo all of my hard work humanizing him? He’s not going to want to follow the rules if we don’t give him positive reinforcement for it! Did you even read the parenting book I sent you?”

Bruce’s eye twitched. Dick had been yelling at him for 37 minutes. Tim was keeping count. “Based on the blood at the scene, it’s a viable theory. And I read that book when I took *you* in, Dick. If any of its principles worked, Discowing wouldn’t have happened.”

"*Discowing was a beautiful creation!"*

Tim smiled as he tinkered with his vigilante motorcycle. Outsourcing his frustration had been smart; Dick was great at arguing with Bruce. Not as good with Jason, but a seasoned veteran nonetheless.

Tim's smile turned into a frown. That was another thing he was mad about. Bruce didn't appreciate the lengths Tim was going to to keep plausible deniability going. The whole point had been to stop them from reacting like this. But no, Bruce was so obsessed with solving this case that he was burning his bridges with Jason. The bridges that took *months* to rebuild.

Jason refused to come back to the manor, even when Alfred bribed him with crepes, because he wasn't going to "coexist with a clan of self-righteous bourgeois" who cared more about the letter of their made-up laws than Jason's feelings. Morals would be the death of this family.

Tim did *not* go to the trouble of killing the Joker in a Bat-friendly manner only to have everyone get upset anyway. Even if murder was "wrong," the Joker should have been an exception. Bruce needed to get his head out of the sand, which was why Tim sicced Dick on him. An hour long argument with the leader of the Titans would teach the Dumb Knight to jump to conclusions (even though they were correct).

"—I *know* you're worried about the Joker. So am I," Dick continued. "Imagining that disgusting waste of space near any of my siblings makes me want to take Deathstroke up on that apprenticeship offer—"

"What," Bruce said.

"—but that's no reason to assume the worst of Tim. Look at him, he's just a baby."

Dick gestured to where Tim was rebuilding his motorcycle to run on jet fuel instead of gas. There had been one fire incident and a minor explosion so far. Tim's hair was burnt, and the Batcave smelled like exhaust fumes.

“I’m a *juvenile,*” Tim said, reorganizing his piles of screws. “Baby dragons don’t have such sharp fangs.”

Speaking of which, Tim’s teeth were aching. They’d been like that the last couple of days. It was driving him crazy. He popped a screw into his mouth to chew on to take the edge off, sighing with relief once he had something to grind his molars against.

“Sorry, Timmy, it’s hyperbole. I’m making a point,” Dick said. “Bruce needs help understanding things.”

“I’m confiscating your trust fund,” Bruce told Dick, then turned to Tim. “Champ, you are a wonderful juvenile, but you’re on thin ice. And don’t cross those wires, you’ll set something else on fire.”

Tim blinked and looked down at the interface he’d been tinkering with. Oops, that would have blasted Tim’s eyebrows off. This was more complicated than he’d expected.

“I’m not going to finish this by patrol tonight, am I?” Tim muttered. Shame, he’d wanted to take Red Bird V2.0 out for a spin. Maybe run over Clayface. It would’ve been fun. “Grapples it is.”

“You’re not going on patrol tonight,” Bruce said, wandering over to the Batcomputer. He pulled up the Joker evidence file again. “You and Cass will stay home where it’s safe, and I’ll lock you back in the panic room.”

“Don’t you mean ‘or?’” Tim said.

Bruce grunted ambivalently.

Tim gritted his teeth in annoyance. He was *really* sick of Bruce taking Robin away whenever something remotely dangerous happened. Playing along with the man’s insecurities was testing Tim’s patience, and he didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to keep it up.

He bit down so hard that the screw shattered between his teeth. It took Dick lunging over and fishing the pieces out of his mouth to stop Tim from swallowing them.

***

The next couple days were tense. Tim went to school, his internship at WE, and dance classes without complaining, but when he got home, he passive-aggressively scratched his claws on every screen he could find and dismantled all of Bruce's grapple guns. He even hid the repair kit in the glove box of the Batmobile and told Bruce to use his "detective skills" to find it if he was really that smart.

Bruce thought he was petty? Tim would return it in spades.

He had many plans to continue harassing Bruce like this, but they fell by the wayside fairly quick.

"What do you mean there's been an Arkham breakout?" Dick said, voice as tight as piano wire.

Tim and Cass looked up from where they were doing their stretches on the mats in the Batcave. They'd been putting in twice as many hours of sparring and dance practice to stop Tim from losing his mind. (It'd only been half-working.)

They rolled to their feet and trotted over to the Batcomputer. Bruce was already on patrol trying to convince Spoiler to stay inside until the Joker was caught (which only made Steph *more* determined to be on the streets) and track down Jason, who was still channeling his inner dead kid and ghosting the entire family.

"It means," Babs said, her face grainy over the video call she'd made to the cave, "that the psychotic janitor they put in isolation in Arkham dug a tunnel through his cell wall into a maintenance shaft and set off five minor explosions. He's calling himself Mr. Clean and has vowed to rid the world of filth. Now we've got several rogues whose cells were damaged in the explosion on the streets, and Batman and Nightwing aren't enough to hold the tide."

Alfred sighed, setting down a tray of post-workout snacks for Tim and Cass. "Never a dull night, is there, Miss Gordon?"

“Of course not. That’s too much to ask,” she grumbled. Babs’ eye bags had bags, and she looked exhausted. “But you know what this means.”

“Yes! Cass and I are back on the roster,” Tim said, bouncing on his heels.

“No!” Dick said. “You can help with the comms, but no endangering yourselves.”

Tim snagged a tuna sandwich from the tray and rolled his eyes. “We all know I’ve only stayed inside because I was hanging out with Cass. Bruce had nothing to do with it. If I want to be on the streets, I’m going to be on the streets.”

Cass nodded and stole Tim’s sandwich before he could finish it. Tim had stayed inside the last couple days, but dance lessons with her weren’t cutting it anymore. He needed to fight crime to burn off his extra energy.

“I hate to admit it, but we need them, Dick,” Babs said. “You know how Gotham gets with breakouts like this. Every goon is out looking for their next gig, and the rogues cause as much chaos as possible. It’s just for a few days. I’ll make sure they stay in high-visibility areas, near backup.”

Dick pulled his hair, looking way too stressed to be healthy. “*Fine*, but I don’t like this.”

“Nobody does,” Alfred said. “Aside from Master Timothy, of course.”

“Yeah, this is pretty great,” Tim said, and ran to get suited up.

***

The next few days were a blur.

Gotham was reaching peak levels of crazy, as seen by a new high in crime levels and witch hunts through the street. Several gangs of concerned citizens wrecked costume supply stores and burned effigies of the Joker, and several other people started leaving offerings at Tim's bone sculptures for protection.

Tim had thought Gothamites were smart enough not to worship random piles of bones, but apparently desperate times called for desperate measures. Everybody wanted to know what happened to the Joker, and even more wanted him taken care of permanently.

The few times Tim ran into Gordon by the Bat-Signal, the man was so worried about the rogues that he wasn't even passive-aggressive to Bruce about child soldiers. Dick even laid off the comments about his "super hot, long-term, low-commitment girlfriend' he'd just made things official with, because Arkham breakouts were serious business.

(Tim still half-expected Gordon to pull a gun on Dick whenever Nightwing turned his back on the commissioner though. Gordon had this *look* in his eye that reminded Tim of his mother whenever somebody hit on Jack. It promised pain at the first sign of weakness, and pure agony for anyone that looked at his loved ones wrong.)

Bruce was chasing down Scarecrow *and* Mad Hatter, and he was spread thin. There wasn't much time to obsess over the Joker's disappearance with both of them on the loose.

Tim could have helped with those rogues, but Babs was serious about keeping him, Cass, and Steph away from the line of fire. The three of them took care of street-level crime and had a contest to see how many petty thugs they could beat up in a night.

"I'd win if I could use my wings," Tim reminded Cass the second night in a row she trounced him and Steph. "This is an unfair way to run this bet."

Cass rolled her eyes and held out her hand. Steph had already emptied her pockets, muttering insults under her breath, then left to go home. Tim gave Cass a wad of cash, M&Ms, and pebbles he found on patrol.

What a hustler.

On day three, Tim got tired of the routine. He slunk off to the sewers on a lead that he *conveniently* forgot to tell the Bats about, and basked in his own cleverness. Those hacks he made to his tracking data were great; he could run off whenever he wanted.

Sure, the sewers were disgusting and smelled worse than a teenager's armpit during a football game, but the lack of supervision made it worth it.

So did the cannibalistic crocodile man.

"Hey, Waylon," Robin giggled, watching his favorite rogue rise from the water. "Long time, no see! Ready for a rematch?"

Killer Croc widened his eyes when he saw who it was. They'd had a couple fights over the years—bloody, violent one that left Tim euphoric and Killer Croc scarred. "Oh fu—"

Tim pulled out his bo staff and *pounced.*

***

Red Hood sighed when he found Tim gloating over Killer Croc's prone form half an hour later.

Tim beamed from where he was standing on top of Waylon Jones, who was unconscious and bleeding from many bite marks. Tim hadn't transformed for the fight, but he *had* let his teeth get sharp enough to puncture the guy's thick skin. Fighting mutant alligator humans was the closest Tim could get to tussling with a dragon while Janet was away, and he loved the challenge of besting the guy without relying on his claws.

"Want to explain to me why the entire Bat clan is having panic attacks over where you are?" Jason asked, crossing his arms.

"Uh," Tim said. "They noticed I was gone?"

“No shit they noticed,” Jason said. “Batman had to physically stop Nightwing from punting a guy off a roof. Dickface is feral right now, you little troublemaker. Way to play to his PTSD. You didn’t even leave a note.”

Dick got to act homicidal without reprisal? Tim stepped on Croc’s face and ground his heel in, irritated. And Bruce claimed not to have favorites.

“Come on, I’ll help carry the nutcase back to the surface,” Jason said. “Now answer your comms and stop them from going insane with worry. This is not helping them trust you. Babs hacked my helmet to find you and everything.”

“You have no right to get on my case,” Tim said, shelving his hoard’s concern away for later. One of these day’s they’d figure out they didn’t’ have to worry about Tim. He was excellent at taking care of himself. “You’ve been AWOL all week. Where’s the justice?”

“Dead like the Joker,” Jason said. He hoisted Croc onto his shoulder and hauled him through ankle-deep sewage.

Tim followed. He turned off his tracker scrambler and switched his comm back on. There was a slew of messages and requests for a status report, which he ignored in favor of the voice chat.

“Hey guys!” he said onto the main Bat channel. “I’m hanging out with Hood, what’s up?”

He removed his comm so their yelling wouldn’t damage his ear. Tim got déjà vu to whenever Jack freaked out about Tim getting hurt. It made his heart warm. Silly humans.

Tim let them get the yelling out of their systems and told them he’d been following a lead on Killer Croc and didn’t want interruptions, and that *yes,* he was fine. No injuries whatsoever and nary a Joker to be seen.

Jason snorted and grabbed Tim’s comm. “He’s lying. The kid has bruised ribs and a bite mark on his arm.”

“Sssnitch,” Tim hissed, letting his tongue fork. Fighting Croc barely even counted as vigilantism; it was just something Tim did for fun. Basically a hobby.

Jason rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Baby Bird. You’re lucky I found you instead of Nightwing.”

They reached the manhole Tim had crawled in from. It was twelve feet of ladder rungs to the surface.

“How *did* you find me?” Tim asked. He cracked his neck, then transformed into his dragon shape.

Jason hauled Killer Croc onto Tim’s back and let him crawl up the wall to the surface. Tim was *just* small enough to fit himself through the manhole in dragon form, but it was a squeeze. Stuffing Croc through the opening took some time too. Good thing the man was still knocked out.

“I put a tracker on your Robin uniform after the last time you were in Crime Alley,” Jason said, replacing the manhole cover. “Figured I had to take stalking you into my own hands since your Batgear is compromised.”

Jason had *tagged* him? And Tim hadn’t even noticed? Jason was so awesome. Excellent hoard material. Tim was so glad he was back from the dead.

“This is why you’re one of my favorites,” Tim said, rippling back into human form. He shook his hair out and let it fluff around his ears in a halo. “Good human. Best retro Robin ever.”

“One of? I thought I was *the* favorite,” Jason said. He glanced at Killer Croc and winced. “Holy shit, you did a number on him.”

Waylon Jones was a mess of bite marks, blood, and taser burns. Tim had had a lot of fun darting forward and latching onto the man’s back, then biting him again and again. Jones had no idea how to handle someone who *also* liked to munch on people. His screams were hilarious. Tim hoped he broke out of Arkham quickly so they could do this again.

“You’re in the top nine.” Tim hummed as an incoming call from Cass appeared on his phone.

“Nine? That’s *all* your hoard, you little—”

“My emotional support ninja is calling. Later tater,” Tim said. He jumped onto the closest fire escape and started heading toward the Bowery, where Cass was patrolling. She probably had over thirty thugs on her count already, but Tim had a *quality* takedown, so maybe it’d even out? He didn’t want to lose their bet *again.*

“Wait, tell me who your actual favorite is,” Jason called. “How do you rank them? *Tim—”*

Tim tuned him out as he spotted Nightwing beelining toward him from a neighboring rooftop, the picture of righteous protective rage.

Tim swore and started running for an entirely different reason, leaving Jason and his enraged shouts behind.

***

As always, Tim’s disappearing act earned him no favors with his humans. By now, both Tim and the Waynes were sick of arguing in circles, so Alfred just confiscated Tim’s share of cookies for the rest of the week, and Bruce assigned Tim to patrol within eyesight of Batman at all times.

“Until I know you’re not going to put yourself in danger,” Bruce said, because the Waynes considered Tim playing with Waylon to be *dangerous*, “you’ll stick with me.”

Tim debated being offended, then realized he got to spend unlimited patrol time with his favorite human, so he decided to be the bigger person and let it go. It’d been forever since he and Bruce got to hang out. The Joker case was taking all his attention, but at least now Tim and Bruce could have their nights back.

Hoard time, get.

The next week went smoothly. Mad Hatter was returned to Arkham, several other petty rogues were dealt with, and the newly dubbed Mr. Clean was caught by Nightwing. Dick was able to talk the man down and take him back to Arkham for therapy without much effort. Apparently the guy was pretty nice until he got on one of his rants about cleaning supplies.

Still no news on the Joker, which was great for Tim and bad for Bruce. He was wound tighter than a German watch and getting antsier every day. He needed to relax, otherwise it was only a matter of time before he snapped.

Two weeks into the manhunt, Babs provided the opportunity to do just that.

She interrupted patrol with a sinister chuckle, connecting everybody's comms without warning, taking advantage of a lull in crime fighting to make them communicate.

"What the hell, Oracle?" Red Hood growled, his voice distorted over the comms. "I *told* you I don't want to be on your channel. Get out of my helmet."

"Hi, Hood!" Tim whisper-yelled into his mic. He was on stakeout with Bruce and the wind made talking into the comms harder. "Don't worry, O does what she wants. You don't get a choice in it. Isn't it great?"

"No, it's not!" Jason muttered something about needing a new, uncompromised helmet—and a less stalkerish family. Tim ignored the comment. So did Babs, who sounded suspiciously gleeful.

"Everyone, I know you're not busy right now, so tune in," she said. "I've got some prime-time comedy for you guys."

"This is no time for distractions, Oracle," Batman growled. He and Tim were tracking one of Joker's old henchmen through the financial district, in case the guy was up to something nefarious.

Sadly, Gregory Flanders was on the up and up; he'd left the Joker's gang shortly before Jason's close encounter with the crowbar, went to therapy, and got professional help for the many mental illnesses he struggled with. As far as Tim could tell, the man was completely clean and doing his

best to start fresh, which made for a long, boring night hiding in window niches on gothic skyscrapers.

Plus, it was raining. Ice-cold sheets of slush that made Tim's teeth chatter. He had to be careful not to cut his lips on his canines. They ached like crazy. Not fun. He grabbed a chunk of concrete off the roof and chewed on it, sighing from the relief. Cold and in pain did *not* a good time make.

Bruce frowned at the action, concerned, but Tim waved him off. It wasn't too bad; he was just a little miserable.

"Relax, Bats, we both know your lead is a dead end," Babs said. "This will be quick, and all of us could use something to laugh over."

She could say that again. Bruce was so stressed that he was going to get gray hair, and that was just from covering for Tim with the GCPD (Killer Croc had been missing a couple chunks of skin that were hard to explain to Gordon) and chasing a couple long shot leads.

Steph's voice crackled over the comms. "I sure do! Black Bat is with me, and she also wants to hear the joke. Come on, O, stop with the suspense."

"We don't have time for—" Bruce growled.

"It's my dad," Babs said. "He's calling to talk about his 'concerns' over my dating life."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the drizzle of rain and Tim chewing on his chunk of concrete.

"Answer the phone," Bruce said.

Babs cackled like a supervillain and started the call.

“Dad? Hi Dad! How’ve you been? Time? Yes, I have some time, but only a little.” Babs said in a breezy, giggly voice. “Dick is calling me tonight, you know how he is. Can’t spend a moment away from me. It’s so cute—“

Tim glanced over, and Bruce was *definitely* trying not to smile. That made Tim happy as he snuggled against him; Bruce could use a laugh. He was way too grim these days.

“Actually, Dick is what I want to talk about.” Gordon said, strain evident in his voice.

Steph and Cass laughed quietly on their channel. Tim assumed Babs had muted them on her end because Gordon kept talking, listing all the red flags he’d seen in her and Dick’s relationship. It was a long list.

“Where *is* Dick?” Tim asked Bruce, tugging on his cloak. “He hasn’t answered comms in a while.”

Tim’s wrist computer buzzed. He glanced down; Dick was using the text feature.

NW: Investigating docks. Listening. Can’t reply.

“Huh, well, hope you think this fake dating thing is as funny as everyone else does,” Tim said into the comm. “I still think it’s gross.”

NW: :)

Gordon’s voice raised an octave to illustrate a point. He was very impassioned. Tim suspected it was because Dick posted a picture of Babs and him on social media earlier that said “She calls me Daddy too” and tagged the commissioner in it.

That had blown up in less than an hour, and was trending on three platforms. Tim had silenced his phone to stop getting notifications.

“He’s changed, Dad,” Tim heard Babs say, ignoring her dad’s words of wisdom. “I know you think he’s an airheaded rich kid, but he’s so sensitive. He just needs someone to *understand* him. I can make him better.”

“She *didn’t*,” Jason choked out.

Even Bruce snorted at that. Dick’s public Instagram was a collage of him in booty shorts, rants critiquing designer cereals, and pictures of random smoothies captioned with “mood” and “this is my year.” It was an appalling mix of Dick’s random interests overlaid with a rose-tinted playboy persona. There was nothing to understand there. Only excessive glitter and bad puns.

“Sweetheart, please, just don’t jump into this,” Gordon said. “I don’t want you to get burned.”

“Too late for that, Dad,” Babs said gleefully. “Dick is smoking hot. Getting a little singed is inevitable. Did you know he speaks French? It’s so romantic. There’s this thing he does with his tongue—“

Tim yanked his comm out. Bruce patted his head as Tim spat out the concrete and gagged.

Was nothing sacred? Tim was trying to put criminals in jail, but the real crime being committed was misusing the comms for romantic evil.

“It’s safe to listen,” Bruce said a minute later, looking amused.

Tim warily put his comm back in, looking longingly at the empty streets. If only there were a robbery, Tim could distract himself from Babs and Dick’s twisted sense of humor.

“—know I’m the last person you want relationship advice from, but I really think you should slow down—” Gordon was saying.

“Oh, one second,” Babs said. “Dick is calling. Sorry, Dad, I’ll catch you later. Thanks for the talk. Love you!”

She hung up and snickered. Babs had a funny, snorty laugh when she lost it, and it was joined by Steph and Cass cackling at the top of their lungs. Tim loved Cass's laugh especially; it was breathy and almost silent, but so full of joy. Hearing it almost made up for the mental damage he'd taken hearing Babs talk about her fake relationship.

"I can see why you chose being a playboy for your cover," Babs said to Bruce. "I hated watching you do this as a kid, but being on the other side is great."

"It is," Bruce said. His shoulders were relaxed for the first time since New Years. "I'm glad you and Nightwing are having fun."

"I'm not," Tim said. "You two are worse than my parents."

Janet felt the same way about kissing as Tim did. She just indulged Jack because she loved him so much. Tim had suffered *greatly* as a child as a consequence, and he still hadn't forgiven her for it. Love made people do terrible, *terrible* things.

"Since it bothers you, I'll make sure they keep it PG on the comms." Bruce ruffled Tim's hair again. Tim wrapped Bruce's cape around himself and purred. There, much warmer. "But it's a harmless prank, so we'll let them have their fun."

Tim squinted up at B. Last he checked, psychologically tormenting someone wasn't harmless. Where did Bruce get off making double standards like this?

"Should we call it a night?" Steph said. "The weather sucks. Any criminals still out deserve to have their crimes go off without a hitch."

"Yes. Am cold," Cass said.

Bruce sighed and looked at Tim half buried in his cape. Batman was made to inspire terror, but now he just looked tired and relaxed. "I suppose that's not a bad idea—"

Dick's voice cut over the comms, harsh and glasslike. "Cancel that. B, I found the Joker."

Tim blinked. Dick had *what now?*

Bruce stiffened. "Do not engage. I'm en route. Keep your distance."

He stood up, taking the wonderful warmth of the Bat-cloak with him. Tim made grabby hands. The rain was *miserable.*

"About that," Dick said, "I don't think danger is really a worry, B, not with the condition he's in . . . or, at least, the pieces of him that are left."

Tim stood up, balanced on the thin window ledge. A hundred-foot drop was below him. All it'd take was a strong wind to knock him over the edge.

Bruce sucked in a breath. "Excuse me?"

"It's the Joker," Dick's voice was tight, but he seemed shocked. "He's . . . B, he's *dead."*

There was a moment of silence, then every Bat started talking. Bruce was unmoving, rain dripping off his cowl as he stood statue-like on the ledge. He seemed too shocked to do anything but listen to Dick's report.

Tim was glad, because he meant he didn't notice Tim turning as stiff as an ironing board.

There were pieces left?

How?

Chapter End Notes

Well, Schrödinger, it was a good run. Thanks for playing, but I'll be asking you to leave Happy Families now. Please step off the stage and grab your effects on the way out. Security will see you to the door.

Bruce: I think Tim killed the Joker.
Jack (who knew exactly what Tim was planning): Tim? My baby? The light of my life? Commit MURDER? Inconceivable!

Tim gets his violent tendencies from his mom, and his manipulative, lying streak from his dad.

Meanwhile, at Arkham (final episode)

Secretary: Hi Gary, nice to see you again. How was the outside world?
Gary: Dirty, devilish, covered in filth! Although I did enjoy visiting my local library and talking with Nightwing. He's a very friendly chap.
Secretary: He is. If he were a woman I'd be in trouble. Anyway, we got your cell cleaned up and your escape tunnel filled. You're next door to the Ex-Director, and the other janitors made you a welcome home card.
Gary: Thank you, Matilda. I'll tell them hello for you. I understand now . . . leaving was a mistake. I'm not ready to take on the world yet. I must first start with Arkham. Once it has been cleansed, I will be ready to take on all the filth of the world outside.
Secretary: That's nice, Gary. I'll visit you in a few days and you can tell me all about it, but I have to get back to work now.
Gary: Alright, have a wonderful night, and inform your paramore that she has my respect. OSHA workers fight against their own brand of filth—the filth of incompetent building codes!
Secretary: She'll love that. Goodnight, Gary.
Security Guard: And there he goes. I think that guy is my favorite criminal of all time. What are you working on now?
Secretary: Killer Croc's file. He's rejoined the Robin Support Group. Apparently those bites were from the Boy Wonder.
Security Guard: . . . I thought the doctors said he got mauled by a wild animal?
Secretary: I don't know what to tell you, I just work here.
Security Guard: Fair enough.

And that's a wrap for the Arkham Squad as well. They can hang out together by the Cask of Jokerillado and relax while Tim causes havoc outside. ;)

The Missing Pieces

Chapter Summary

What's a little murder between friends?

Chapter Notes

Tim: There will surely be no consequences for any of my actions.

Tim: That is everyone's cue to stop accusing me of murder, by the way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On paper, Tim's plan had been watertight, but apparently, counting on mutant piranhas for murder cleanup had been a mistake. Tim would remember this slight. Darn invasive species, ruining Tim's perfect crime. He'd pitch a Gotham Bay cleanup project to Bruce to exterminate them as revenge.

There had been one Ziploc bag of body parts left. It had floated in the bay and gotten stuck under one of the piers. The tide lowered and it hung there to rot. Except it *didn't,* because the first frost had come and froze it. So, three months later, when Dick was combing the docks, he'd seen the bag, reached over, grabbed it, and came face to face with some not-very-decomposed Joker bits.

Tim had been lied to by all his nature documentaries. Global warming, a threat, yeah right. Where was it when he needed it?

It didn't help that the bag Dick found had some very . . . Identifiable parts.

The entire Bat clan stared in morbid fascination at the strands of green hair, gooey flesh, and lone eyeball Dick brought back to the cave. Even Jason had been lured back to check it out. He had a satisfied smile on his face. Tim suspected he was remembering the lovely torture back on Halloween. It had been a fun time.

“We’ll run a DNA test, just in case,” Bruce said. “But . . .”

“Yeah, this seems pretty concrete,” Dick said. He poked the eyeball through the plastic and shuddered.

Tim wanted to argue that you couldn’t identify somebody based off an eyeball alone, but . . . How did he put it? You totally could. The Joker’s deranged iris was soaked with madness. Even a blind person would have known who the thing belonged to on vibes alone. It was the most disgusting thing Tim had even seen, and that was saying something.

The only bright side to the situation was that Jason and Tim’s DNA wasn’t on the bag, so there was technically still no way to prove it was them.

The lack of admissible evidence didn’t stop Bruce from thinking they did it though.

Jason loudly protested the allegations, saying he had every right to kill that man, and if he hypothetically *had* everyone should butt out. He had dibs, given the whole murdered by crowbar thing, and Bruce didn’t even have *proof*. It was discrimination against the criminally inclined, and Bruce needed to check his privilege.

Anything Bruce said to the contrary was used against him with increasingly high volume and prejudice. Arguing with Jason was as productive as talking to a brick wall. A brick wall that could shoot people.

“Lay off, B,” Tim finally said, waving at Steph as she left the cave. There was only so much shouting she could stand before either joining in or getting bored. “Jason’s right. Our crimes are like Santa. They’re not real and don’t exist.”

“Santa is real, Tim,” Dick said. “John Constantine has been trying to kill him for years.”

“My point being, you don’t need to lecture us,” Tim continued, waving that fun fact away. “Just because we hypothetically killed a man and left his body parts lying around the docks doesn’t mean anything.”

The way everybody looked at him, you'd think he said something strange.

Typical humans. If this was how they acted when he was *suspected* of killing someone Tim had no desire to find out how insufferable they'd be if he admitted to actually doing it.

***

Apparently, hypotheticals meant nothing. Tim was still innocent until proven guilty, but Bruce was staunchly unhappy about his Robins being possibles murderers, and was frowny all the time. It was the principle of things, but it was still annoying. Apparently, Bruce couldn't "trust" Tim anymore, and wasn't comfortable letting him loose on the general public.

Hence, why Dick and Alfred drove him to school, and any free time Tim had was swallowed up by his WE internship and Cass's dance lessons. Tim's thighs *ached*. He didn't know how she made it look so effortless. Also, really Bruce? The buddy system? They all knew this was doomed to fail. Tim was ungovernable.

"He's overreacting," Tim told Dick on their morning drive to school, three days into the house arrest. "He has no admissible evidence. I shouldn't be punished like this!"

Dick side-eyed him, unimpressed. "Normally, I would agree with you, but we found a collection of human teeth under your bed, so I'm with Bruce on this one."

The teeth were currently being tested to see if any of the fleshy chunks left on them belonged to the Joker.

"The dentist just gives people them if they ask," Tim said with a shrug. "It's not *my* fault they don't ask questions."

Apparently they normally threw them in the trash, so they were happy when Tim offered to take them off their hands. They didn't even want money for them or to see an ID. Who was Tim to pass up a chance like that?

Dick shook his head as he turned onto a new road. Tim's prison (high school) came into view, all fancy brickwork and wrought iron gates. Students milled by the car pool like the sheeple they were, and Tim prepared himself for eight hours of torture.

"It just isn't fair," Tim grumbled. He kicked his backpack and made no move to leave the car. "I'm doing my best. He shouldn't think the worst of me."

"I know, Tim. Don't worry, Bruce isn't going to keep this up forever," Dick said as parked by the curb. "He's just concerned since you've been more unhinged lately. You know how he is, he's always overreacting. Going along with it is really mature, I know it was much harder for me to be so understanding at your age. Just behave for a while and he'll loosen up."

"What do you think I've *been* doing?" Tim asked. "I want a lawyer for unjust dragon oppression."

He protected his hoard, and even did it quietly not to upset anyone (mostly Bruce). It made this situation frustrating. And Tim . . . Tim was a little hurt.

Dick patted him on the head. "There, there, Tim. It'll be okay."

Tim scowled, even as he leaned into the touch.

***

Bruce's reaction was predictable and annoying, but the rest of Tim's hoard was split down the middle. Some couldn't care less and others cared *way* too much. It was a house divided.

Cass, unfortunately, was in the "no murder" club. She hated killing people, so she was stealing all of Tim's cookies, hiding silly putty in his shoes, and annihilating him on the sparring mat every day. Tim would get mad, except that he knew she could tell he was lying about his innocence and *really* didn't want her whistle blowing. Petty pranks were better than another Morality Lecture from Bruce.

Dick swung between maniacally happy and existentially burnout. Half the time he agreed with Bruce, the other half he was throwing himself at Jason and Tim and declaring he didn't care if they'd done it, he was just glad they were safe. Tim made sure to give him more hugs, suffocating though they were. Dick always freaked out when it came to the Joker. In some ways he coped worse than Jason.

(Tim was still miffed Dick wasn't using his Oldest Child powers to get Bruce to stop babysitting Tim every second of the day though. Hoard time was great, but Tim was starting to get twitchy.)

Steph was glad the Joker was dead and purposefully avoided the family drama. She said she had better things to do than obsess over Gotham's greatest act of public service, like play Pokemon Go and organize her sock drawer.

Alfred was Switzerland. As in, frosty and unaffected by the drama. He baked a cake and popped open a bottle of sparkling cider to celebrate the Joker's death, delighted that the "deranged lunatic" was put down for good. Jason crawled out of the woodwork to join the celebration. He added candles, and they threw a small party celebrating the clown's demise. Tim got to lick the frosting bowl.

Over all, it was well-balanced. Tim mostly watched the drama unfold and maintained his Schroedinger's Cat impression. Sure, it sucked that they'd found pieces of the Joker, so they knew he was dead instead of missing, but without proof the Waynes would never get anywhere.

All Tim had to do was wait out the storm until a bigger crisis distracted them. Easy peasy.

***

A month later on patrol, his comm crackled.

"Boy Wonder," Oracle said tightly. "We need to talk."

***

Tim crawled through the Clocktower's skylight, minding his claws so they wouldn't scratch the stonework. His nails were getting sharper lately, and harder to keep human shaped. It took more concentration not to shift than it used to. Tim blamed it on puberty, like he did most of his problems.

Babs was at her monitors. All the other lights were off, casting her face into stark, bluish shadows. Her Arkham program ran in the background, algorithms churning with code.

She looked up at him with an inscrutable expression, the blue light from her screens reflected in her glasses, hiding her eyes from view. Her lips were pursed into a thin line, and she tapped her fingers against the armrest of her wheelchair, the only giveaway that she wasn't calm.

"Tim, do you want to explain why I found a ghost file for an unscheduled update on my Arkham servers three months ago?" she said.

Tim cocked his head, analyzing his best move. He was within jumping distance of the skylight, but he'd helped Babs run diagnostics enough to know lock down procedures had already started. If Babs wanted to talk, there was no way he was leaving this room.

He sighed and hopped onto the floor, cape billowing behind him like wings. Babs gripped her armrest, face carefully neutral.

"Guess I should have known you'd catch me eventually," Tim said. "I thought it was pretty clever, though."

"I don't appreciate my lessons behind used against me."

Tim chuckled. "You say that like this isn't why I wanted to learn hacking in the first place. Took you longer to find me than I expected though."

Two years of learning from Gotham's greatest hacker and he still hadn't done a perfect job. The virus had erased everything, but he hadn't thought to scrub diagnostics as thoroughly. No wonder Babs was still the best.

Babs' face tightened. For the first time, Tim thought she was looking at him like he was something truly dangerous. "Why did you do it, Tim?"

He took off his mask. His eyes shone in the dark, the whites as bright as the moon. "Why do you think? Joker killed my Jason. It was an eye for an eye."

"You promised Batman you wouldn't kill!"

"And I promised myself I'd protect my hoard. That trumps everything," Tim growled. "I don't *care* if it was bad, Babs. I'd do the same for any of you. Nobody touches my treasures. *Nobody.*"

Treasure wasn't even a good enough word to encapsulate what his hoard meant to him. Tim had been so young when Jason died that he hadn't been able to comprehend the pain he was in. A piece of his world had been snuffed like a candle flame, and the loss never went away; even now that Jason was back, the phantom pain clung to him like a scar.

Tim was glad the Joker was dead, and he was happy he'd made it hurt. He'd do it again if he could, and he'd be even more extreme.

Barbara took a deep breath, staying near her computer. Tim noticed her baton was hooked to the side her her chair. "Tim, I know you care about us, but—"

"No, you don't understand!" Tim rubbed his eyes. He was so tired of having this talk, of being treated like his perspective was wrong when it was just *different.* "I keep telling you, none of you get it!"

He hated trying to process this, hated trying to understand his feelings—even now that things were better, his heart *hurt* thinking of Jason and how a tragedy like that could happen again. He could fail and someone could destroy another part of his hoard, and tear away one of the precious few things Tim loved with all his heart. Tim didn't know if he could survive that a second time.

"Tim, you're right, I don't," Babs said, quieter. "So *help me* understand."

Tim swallowed hard. He hated emotional moments, especially since he was the one having one right now. He tried to think of a way to translate his feelings into words, and stuttered to say them.

"It's all in the PDF," he said. "Mom and I don't feel like you do about most things. But hoard is different. You're all we have—all *I* have. Nothing else matters. Whenever you get hurt, I feel it just as bad. When Jason died I thought I would too."

He remembered sobbing alone in his room, trying to grapple with feelings he'd never experienced, and so sad he couldn't function. If Janet hadn't told him to channel it into anger instead, Tim wondered if he'd have died of a broken heart.

"You're the same, Babs," Tim said. He averted his eyes from her, hands balled into fists. "When I found out Joker hurt *you*, I didn't fly for a month."

Growing up, he'd always had eyes on Batman and Robin. It'd been easy to overlook Batgirl because she was so fiercely independent, always jumping from case to case and leaving the others in the dust. She'd shone so brilliantly Tim had to squint to look at her, and when she'd retired her mantle for a civilian life it felt like the end of an era. He hadn't known he loved her back then. Hadn't made the connection between stalking habits and hoard creation. He'd figured the absence of sunshine in Gotham's night was because of the pollution rather than one of his humans vanishing from sight.

She'd been attacked before Jason was killed, but the incident was never publicized. Commissioner Gordon had kept it out of circulation and nobody on the case wanted to remember it. Tim hadn't found out Barbara was Oracle until after he became Robin, and seeing her wheelchair and knowing she *couldn't* grapple across the skyline anymore had hurt like a bullet to his spine.

Tim had already been angry at the Joker, but after that, it was hard to stop himself from throwing away his plans and breaking into the man's cell. Janet would have. She'd never have played the long game. But Tim had, because he thought that would have made his hoard happier.

"I couldn't protect you or Jason," he said softly, wrapping his arms around himself. "I failed you both and there's nothing I can do to change that. So, at least I could make it so the Joker can never hurt either of you or *anyone* else again. I was just trying to protect you. I don't understand why that's bad."

Vengeance was his inheritance. It was only right to make others hurt worse than they'd hurt him. It was one of the first lessons Janet had taught him, telling him softly that it wasn't about hate. For dragons, the supreme act of love was doing everything to protect what was theirs even if it burned the world down in the process.

He'd done his best, but it still didn't feel like enough. Nothing, Tim reflected, would *ever* feel like enough, but he had hoped it would at least be *something.* And yet, all Bruce had been since suspecting Tim of murder had been disappointed.

Tim flinched as Barbara laid her hand on his arm. He hadn't heard her wheel closer to him. His emotions were messing him up, as usual. Stupid human DNA, he didn't ask to be like this.

"Tim, sweetheart, it's okay. I'm right here," she said. "Jason's back and we're both fine."

"But you weren't before." Tim said. "Jason was gone, and you're still not alright."

Babs' hand tightened. "That's just because it takes time for a wound to heal, kiddo. I miss my legs, but life goes on. I have other ways to fly now."

The room thrummed with more processing power than the Batcave. In here, Babs could be everywhere in the world at once. She would never be weak, especially not in her Clocktower.

"I know . . . But you're upset with me," Tim said. "Everybody is."

"I can't speak for anyone else, but I'm upset because you beat me at my own game, you insane gremlin," she said, rubbing gentle circles on his arm. "I'll never be mad that you care about us. I'm sorry I didn't realize you were also hurting, but I didn't need the Joker dead to be avenged. I did that all by myself."

"You . . . Didn't?" Tim frowned. That didn't make sense. It went against everything Tim knew. Even Jason had wanted the Joker to die.

“No, I’ve never thought about revenge like that. But that being said,” Barbara’s voice hitched slightly. “Thank you, Tim. I… I didn’t know you did it for me as well as Jason. People… forget, sometimes, what happened.”

She pressed a palm against her leg, face back lit by her computer monitors. For a moment, she looked smaller, tired, and burdened.

“I could never forget,” Tim said. He laid his hand on top of hers. His fingernails glinted with half-transformed claws. Emotions always made it hard to keep his human shape. “You’re part of my hoard, Babs. I just want you to be safe and happy. You matter more than anything.”

More than family, more than Robin, more than the world itself. Each and each person Tim collected was irreplaceable. He just didn’t know how to make his humans understand that.

Babs pulled him into a hug. She squeezed him even tighter than Dick did, and all rational thought left Tim’s head. Earlier, Babs had looked almost scared . . . But scared people didn’t hug Tim. Hugging was a gesture off affection, and that meant—

“I can’t believe you,” Babs said. “I wanted to strangle you for cracking my code earlier, but I’m not even angry anymore. You and your Bambi eyes will be the death of me.”

Tim returned the embrace, wrapping her in his fiercest hug. His brain was having trouble catching up, with all the emotional whiplash he was facing, but if he read this right . . . “Does this mean you won’t tell Bruce?”

Babs snorted. “Nah, kiddo. Whoever hacked my Arkham program was real good. No evidence left at all. I triple checked. Looks like the Joker is a cold case, after all.”

She pulled away and tapped a few keys. The update flag was deleted from the system, and the Arkham program continued its system updates. Now there really was no proof.

“This will be our secret,” Babs said, cupping Tim’s face in her hands. “The one and only murder I’ll cover for you, so enjoy it, Tim. I’m not doing this again. ”

“I will. Thanks Babs,” Tim said, hugging her again.

An ache he didn’t know he’d had suddenly settled. Maybe Bruce was still upset, maybe killing the Joker hadn’t fixed everything, but his hoard still cared about him. Babs was looking out for him, and she was right. Even if she couldn’t fly again, she was safe and happy. And as long as she was, Tim would be too.

“Of course,” she added, into his ear. “I won’t do it for free.”

Tim grinned into her shoulder. “Blackmail from my own hoard? Really?”

“Yup,” Babs said. She wasn’t letting go, but this wasn’t a hug Tim wanted to end. “Believe me, I’m cashing it *all* in, lizard boy. “You’re going to hate me once I’m through with you."

“No I won’t,” Tim said. “Not you. Never you.”

Babs wouldn’t leverage this unless the water was well and truly under the bridge, which meant that the evil, emotional moment was finally over. Blackmail he could handle; another second thinking about his feelings? Not so much.

The computers hummed around them, code running as smoothly as ever. The Arkham program shone on the screens as if it had never been hacked, and Tim felt oddly as if Janet had been wrong.

She’d taught him that dragons had to guard their hoards and that their treasures only needed to be adored and kept safe . . . but right now, it felt like Babs was protecting Tim instead. Not from physical threats or harm, but against the horrible feelings he never let himself confront.

His dragon side bristled at showing so many emotions, but another part—the small, often-ignored human side of his genetics—made him relax into Babs hold and bask in the rare glow of being held.

“Don’t worry Tim, I could never hate you either,” Babs said, running a hand through his hair. “Even if you are a sneaky, feral dragon determined to give me gray hair.”

Tim chuckled and sank deeper into the hug. It didn’t matter how much blackmail she had on his after this, he knew she meant it.

And that made everything absolutely, one-hundred percent worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Jack: ...
Janet: What is it, dear?
Jack: I feel oddly proud of our son . . . I wonder what he just did.

(He was emotionally vulnerable, Jack. You should be VERY proud.)

Meanwhile, at the JLA:

Batman: Robin may have murdered the Joker, and I just don't understand where I went wrong raising him. He knows better than this. I'm a failure as a parent-adjacent figure.
Superman:
Aquaman:
Wonder Woman:
J'onn:
Captain Marvel:
Hawkwoman:
Green Lantern: So no one's going to say it? Fine, I'll say it. Bats, you taught one of Earth's most aggressive apex predators how to use computers and manipulate forensic evidence. What did you THINK was going to happen!?

Meanwhile, Tim is having Emotions because he was a good dragon but is being guilt-tripped by mean, nit-picky humans. Don't worry, he and Bruce will make up soon. Bruce just needs to have the same epiphany that Babs did and accept his murder baby for who he is. (and also that Joker is the exception to the no-kill rule. Tim did a public service by offing that guy.)

Through a Dragon's Eyes

Chapter Summary

Babs cashes in her blackmail, Tim and Bruce have a talk, and PowerPoints are made.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for any typos, I finished typing this at the airport while waiting for my flight. Happy Holidays, hope you enjoy more feels!

Also, I had a guy on a supermarket roof yell that my jacket was cool, and I'm still riding that high. It's the little things in life. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim had expected Babs to psychologically torment him with her blackmail material, but she surprised him. The very next day, she cashed it in. Tim wasn't complaining, but it was weird.

"I don't understand how this is a punishment," Tim frowned, looking around the department store. She'd blindfolded him and taken him to Macey's. "I don't mind shopping."

It was foraging for more hoard materials, of course he enjoyed it. Whenever Tim found something he liked he bought every copy of it in the store, which was why his credit limit was so high. (Jack learned long ago that Tim and Janet had no head for funds when it came to their hoard. Business and finance, yes, but not their pretty rocks, jewelry, or limited edition Hi-Chew flavors. Tim had been finding bags of those around Drake manor for years.)

"Trust me, after today you'll be begging for mercy," Babs said, wheeling them past racks and racks of clothes. "Now, here's the deal. I'll keep your and Jason's 'bonding experience' a secret, but only if you find something here that fits *and* wear it for a week. You break either of those conditions, and I'll tell Bruce his hunch was right."

"Okay, deal," Tim said, not seeing what the problem was.

Babs waved him toward the changing rooms. “Alright, perfect. Have at it.”

Tim frowned. This was suspiciously easy. Babs was a master of petty vengeance. There *had* to be a caveat, but Bruce would be insufferable if he confirmed Tim's kill. The frowny face of doom was bad it enough as it was, but Tim would wilt like a hothouse plant in January if he was exposed to it any longer. Being the source of his hoard’s emotional issues was agony.

Besides, caveat or no, this wouldn't take long. A few pairs of pants and a T-shirt were nothing. Tim had his measurements memorized.

Still, it was weird Babs had taken him to the girl's section.

Oh well. It's not like that made a difference. Clothes were clothes. How hard could this be?

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Half an hour later, Tim wanted to slap his naive past self in the face.

“Babs, why aren't these standardized?” He demanded, holding up three pairs of jeans that claimed they were the same size. It had taken an eternity to find them and they were all completely different shapes. “This doesn't make sense!”

“Welcome to women's fashion,” Babs said, leaning back in satisfaction. “Depending on the brand you're either a size four or a size nine.”

“What?” Tim said. “Does that mean to find clothes I have to *memorize brands’ measurement systems* ?”

“Yup,” Barbara said. She took a photo of him to memorialize his expression of horror.

Tim took a deep breath and made sure his claws were still retracted so he didn't accidentally rip apart the jeans. Cass' wet cat impersonation whenever Alfred suggested adding to her wardrobe suddenly made so much sense.

Macey's wasn't a clothing store, it was a torture chamber disguised with knit fabric and coupons. He never should have let his guard down. Of course Babs wouldn't choose mercy. She was part of his hoard *because* she was sadistic and ruthless.

"Fine, *fine,*" he said. "I'm good with numbers. This isn't a problem at all."

He'd solved two cold cases this month alone. Clothes shopping was nothing compared to that. Sure, it was frustrating and horrible, but Tim would survive.

***

Another twenty minutes later saw him shrieking from inside the changing stall.

"Why are the shirts so tight Why are they all polyester? Why are there plastic straps on the inside? Babs, Tell me!"

All she did was laugh.

***

An hour and a half into his purgatory, Tim finally found a pair of pants that fit. They were acid green and bedazzled with rhinestones, but Tim was willing to overlook that. He spun in front of the mirror, reveling in the fact that this torture would soon end.

But his victory was short-lived. A moment later he tried to put his phone away. It slid to the floor and laid there like a millennial attempting to navigate the job market.

He stared at it in confusion until he realized what had happened, then stumbled out of the changing stall. “Babs, it doesn't have pockets! Who would do such a thing!?”

Babs looked up from her phone and snorted. “Rich, male fashioner designers. If you’re ever feeling homicidal, I’ll give you their names. Now, back to the search. You’re not in enough pain yet.”

Tim flopped onto the floor and groaned. The smell of cheap carpet cleaner, shoes, and dust filled his senses, but didn’t drown out his despair.

Dante would have a field day with this circle of Hell. Tim's suffering would never end.

***

Tim now hated clothing. He hated fashion, Macey’s, and all clothing stores on the planet. When this was over he was burning Gotham's shopping mall to the ground and running away to live in the woods.

Janet never should have left her mountain. She could've kept Jack there forever and made him forsake his human heritage, and Tim would have been raised in the wild, freed from the evils of clothing discrimination, and his soul would be *whole* instead of torn into pieces by the ravages of capitalism.

“Are you sure you want that?” Babs said, nodding at the only item of clothing Tim was satisfied with. “You have to wear it all week.”

Tim threw the sun dress onto the register with scorn. “I don’t care. You wanted me to suffer, so I'm suffering. Are you happy, you sick person?”

“Very,” Babs said.

Sadist.

The cashier scanned the dress and complimented the color. It was sunflower yellow with little ducks on the hem. Tim glared at the garment and wanted nothing more than to set it on fire.

The sun dress was the only thing he could find that fit, had pockets big enough to put more than a nickel in, and wasn't made of evil scratchy synthetics that made Tim want to claw his skin off. He'd spent two hours in this hellhole and there hadn't been *anything* he could wear. The shopping montages in Dick's chick flicks made more sense now; Tim wanted them reclassified as part of the horror genre.

"We can still go back for a pair of pants if you want," Babs said. "Dresses aren't comfortable to lounge in unless you like flashing people."

Tim slashed his credit card through the card reader. "Again, don't care. If I have to put on another pair of jeans I'm going to burn this store to the ground."

"Preach it, kid," the cashier said.

Waistlines, inseams, bootlegs, skinny jeans, hemlines. Lowrise, high rise. Acid washed, pre-ripped . . . Tim didn't want to *think* about any of those words unless they were case related. He was blocking them from his vocabulary. Alfred would do all his clothes shopping from now on.

Or better yet, Tim would just steal clothes from his hoard. Yes, he liked that idea. Reuse, recycle, repurpose. It fit with his Robin brand, and Tim refused to step foot in another clothing store. (He'd avoid Dick's wardrobe though; too many sparkles.)

"I'm glad you had a terrible time," Babs said as they left the store. "It was very cathartic to watch."

"You're evil," Tim hissed.

"Oh please," Barbara scoffed. "I didn't even make you look for bras—or worse, adaptable clothing. You ever attempted to try on pants in a wheelchair? I was *merciful* today Tim, and don't you forget it."

Tim swallowed hard. He had a feeling if Babs ever caught him killing anyone else, there would be a sequel shopping spree doing just that.

The possibility did more to dissuade Tim from murder than all of his Human classes and Morality lectures combined.

***

When Bruce saw Tim come downstairs in his bright yellow sun dress, he blinked several times, shook his head, nodded, and patted him on the shoulder. Dick said the ducks were very cute, Cass made quacking sounds at him all day, and Jason sent him a video of himself laughing for six minutes straight (Dick had sent pictures to the family group chat.)

None of them actually cared, but the idea that Babs 'tricked' Tim into betting against her, then made him crossdress for a week, was so hilarious that none of them could look him in the eye without bursting into giggles, Steph especially. Silly humans, they'd fall prey to Babs eventually, and when they did Tim would *laugh.*

Tim was just glad Babs wasn't making him wear the Batgirl uniform on patrol. She'd been considering it, but decided she didn't want her legacy tainted by Tim's devil-may-care craziness. Tim didn't know what she was talking about, but he was grateful that is was protecting him from having to try on more clothes.

The only bright side was that the Joker became a cold case. Babs honored her promise to Tim and refused to look into it more, and told Bruce there was nothing to be done.

"He's dead, and that's all that matters," she said. She'd come to the manor to have this talk, and Tim was shamelessly eavesdropping from outside Bruce's study. "If you're still in the mood to solve an impossible riddle, I'll hook you up with some plot-hole filled mystery novels. You can obsess over those instead."

Bruce protested, but Babs wasn't having it.

"I know this has all your hackles raised, but no good will come of digging through this can of worms," she said. "Not only is it pointless, but you're hurting Tim."

Tim blinked. Did he hear that right? Why was Babs bringing up his emotions? That was so embarrassing, not to mention irrelevant. Besides, *Babs* was the one causing Tim emotional pain right now, not Bruce. He couldn't wait to get out of this dress; it still smelled like Macey's and trauma.

"He's good at ignoring his own feelings, but if you keep this up, he'll stop trusting you." Babs continued. "He's not a person, Bruce. You can explain it over and over, but he still won't understand why you're upset."

There was the sound of Bruce pacing. "I can't condone—"

"Look," Babs said. "I get it, I really do. But your rules aren't his rules. If you don't meet him where he's at, how long will it be before he stops trying to do the same for you? For all your experience working with non-humans, you've dropped the ball with Tim. At this rate, Jason won't be the only kid that refuses to come home."

There was a long silence. Evidently, even the Dark Knight couldn't find a response for that.

Tim retreated before they realized he was there.

***

In a rare show of consideration, Bruce knocked before entering Tim's room.

"Hey, chum, can we talk?" he asked.

Tim shrugged and stayed on his bed, hands full with a polishing cloth and his rock collection. A small pile of semi-precious stones was on the comforter next to him, gleaming after the attention he'd lavished onto them.

Bruce sat on the bed. His weight sent several stones tumbling against his leg. Bruce carefully moved them back to Tim's pile.

"Those look nice," Bruce said. He sounded nervous, which was suspicious.

Tim hummed in agreement. "I've been trying to polish them all week, but I'm always too busy."

Between school, WE, dance lessons, vigilantism, and everything else, Tim barely had time to sleep. The only reason he could finish them up today was because Cass's hip hop teacher got the flu and canceled class.

Bruce coughed. "I'm sorry. I know your schedule is . . . full."

Tim poked Bruce's leg in response. Full was putting it lightly. Bruce had filled Tim's calendar with so many things that he had almost no free time left. "You should be. I like taking care of my hoard, and now there are too many things during the day for me to dote on you. We need to rearrange my schedule. I vote we get rid of high school."

Bruce ruffled Tim's hair. He squawked and dropped the citrine he'd been polishing.

"Nice try, but you'll have to talk to Dick about that," Bruce said. "I'm not going to risk my life by getting between him and your education."

"He dropped out of college. He's not qualified to lecture me about my studies," Tim said. Bruce was also forbidden from doing so, seeing as how he'd never gotten through his undergrad. Tim picked up a human molar to polish instead of the citrine. "This one is pretty."

"Is that . . ." Bruce sighed. "Teeth, Tim, really?"

"They're made of bones, so I count them as a mineral." Tim said defensively. His rock collection didn't discriminate just because some grew in bodies, not the ground.

“They’re not bones,” Bruce said. “They’re made of dental tissue. It’s not the same thing.”

“Oh.” Tim frowned at the tooth in his hand. Pretender bones. How deceitful. “Well, they feel nice. See?”

He handed Bruce the molar; it was smooth and strangely shaped. When Tim got stressed he liked to roll different rocks between his fingers and compare the textures, and bones (even pretender bones) were some of the best. It was relaxing, and when he got bored it was fun to crunch on them.

Bruce held the molar in his huge hand, making it look even smaller. He stared at it with the same intense focus he gave every aspect of his life, and sighed. “Tim, we need to talk.”

Tim grabbed another chunk of citrine, cataloging his recent crimes against humanity. He’d expected this to happen. “Are you mad at me again?”

Another sigh, but not the frustrated kind. More tired than anything else. “No, Tim. I wanted to apologize.”

Tim paused, then slowly continued rubbing polish onto the gemstone. Bruce looked at the floor and kept talking.

“I’ve been . . . Wrong to you,” he said. “Or, perhaps unfair is a better word. I’ve spent my life trying to put myself in other people’s shoes—my employees, the rogues, Gotham’s people—to understand why they do the things they do. But Barbara pointed out that I’ve neglected to do that with you.”

The afternoon sunlight was the same color as the stone in Tim’s hand. It soaked the room in honey-colored light, making everything seem as if it were suspended in amber. Tim stared at the gemstone, watching the light reflect off it, and tightened his grip on the rock.

“You sure waited a long time to say anything,” Tim said. “She told you that days ago.”

“You were listening?”

Tim pointed to his ears, deadpan. It wasn't like he could turn his hearing off.

Bruce sighed again. "Apologies. Missteps like that are why I wanted to talk to you."

Tim shrugged. "There's no need—"

"There is. Ever since I took you in, I've asked you to do things my way," Bruce said. "I never paused to think about how that would feel, or that it would hurt. You've been adapting for us all this time, but we haven't made nearly as many changes for you."

The words floored Tim. Not just because they were coherent, full sentences from *Bruce* , but because he hadn't expected to hear them, well, *ever.* It was making him feel things, which was very uncomfortable.

"It's okay," Tim said quietly, yanking the emotions down. "I'm used to it."

He and Janet couldn't be themselves in the human world. They were too dangerous, too wild, too willing to lash out and hurt others. Jack did his best to accommodate for them, but there was still a line in the sand they had to respect; Don't kill. Don't maim. Don't act too different. If anyone found out what they were, their hoards would be in jeopardy, and that was something neither Tim nor Janet could bear.

"I shouldn't expect you to be used to it," Bruce said just as quietly. "I should be making it so you don't have to change what you are just to be with us."

The polishing rag lay forgotten in Tim's hand as he processed that. He didn't know how to tell Bruce that it didn't matter. Whatever they wanted, he'd give, and that Tim would change any part of himself for his humans, if only he knew how.

"Do you remember last year?" Tim asked. "When we talked in the Batcave about your rules?"

Bruce nodded. He was still holding the tooth. It was curled into his palm like a butterfly in a cage.

“I told you I don’t understand them, but that I’d try to follow them anyway,” Tim said. “I still don’t get it. I don’t think I ever will. But I’m trying, Bruce. I’m trying so hard.”

He had his slips. He wanted to hunt like a dragon, not play like a cat, and every time his humans came home battered and bruised, Tim wanted to find who hurt them and make them pay. But he reigned himself in, just like Janet did for Jack. Balancing his nature with the Waynes’ expectations was a tightrope, but Tim was used to walking it.

He just wished they knew how hard it was to be one thing but act like another, and that those slips weren’t seen as bad, when they were all part of the way Tim was meant to be.

“I know, chum,” Bruce said. He scooted over and pulled Tim against his side. “You’re doing wonderfully, and I’m sorry it’s taken so long for me to notice. I’ve been acting as if you were me, and that my rules worked the same for you as they do for Batman.”

“But I’m not you,” Tim said. He craned his neck to look Bruce in the eye. “I’m not even human.”

“You’re not, at least not completely,” Bruce said, curling his fingers in Tim’s hair. “But I’ve been acting as if you were, even though I should know better.”

Tim thought of the JLA and its myriad of non-humans. Did they ever make mistakes like Tim did? Or feel out of place in their skin sometimes? Tim had never considered it, because he rarely cared about anything outside his hoard long enough to make that kind of effort.

“I want you to know that all of this,” Bruce said, “the rules, the Joker, my reaction . . . It’s not because I’m angry, Tim. It’s because I’m scared.”

Tim swallowed. “Scared of me?”

Barbara had been wary back at the Clocktower at first. Tim remembered the look in her eyes—like Tim wasn’t *Tim* anymore, but something dangerous and unpredictable. She’d even had her baton

ready, just in case. Tim was fine with that—dragons didn't have to be *liked* by their hoard, and it was good Babs could take care of herself—but it still stung.

Bruce hugged Tim harder. "No, no sweetheart. I'm scared of *losing* you."

"Oh," Tim said softly. He pressed his face into Bruce's sweater. It smelled like the Batcave. "Don't worry, B, I'm not going anywhere."

He'd never leave his hoard. No matter what happened, Tim would always love them more than the earth itself. Not even being hated would change that. He just wanted them to be safe and happy. As long as they were, he would be too, even if he had to change everything about himself in the process.

"I know," Bruce said. He ran his hand through Tim's hair. "But I don't want you to stay in a place that's hurting you. Just because I am . . . inflexible . . . doesn't mean you should suffer. I'm going to do better, Tim, I promise. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize I needed to."

Tim's next breath shuddered. He felt fragile, like a glass ornament.

"I don't think anybody has ever said that to me before," he whispered.

Jack didn't need words. He'd had these talks with Janet before Tim was born, and they danced a line of their own creation that even Tim had no hope of untangling. They knew how to live with each other's differences without sacrificing who they were, and how to compromise when conflict was unavoidable. Even for all of Janet's complaining and Jack's longsuffering, Tim knew his parents could authentically be themselves together with the pure, simple love of people who endured every fight, every struggle, and every heartache together.

But Tim's hoard wasn't like that. They were all stumbling around each other, trying to find balance and making all kinds of mistakes. Tim had never had a hoard before; he hadn't even realized how off center they all were until recently.

"I'm saying it to you now," Bruce said. "It's my turn to try to understand you. Even if we disagree on some things, that won't change how I feel about you, alright?"

Tim returned Bruce's hug, tentatively at first, then with Dick Grayson fierceness. The gemstones lay scattered around them, forgotten, and Tim tried to keep a lid on the feelings building in him like a pressure cooker.

"I want you to be happy with us," Bruce said. "To be safe as yourself, not forced to pretend for us like you do everywhere else."

Tim wasn't sure how to respond to that. Pretending was all he knew, and he didn't think it would be easy to stop. The line between Tim's human act and himself was blurry and contradictory. There would be habits he couldn't turn off, and other (human ones) impossible to develop in the first place, but the temptation was strong. Bruce was saying that Tim's Tim-ness was okay, and nobody had said that *ever*.

No . . . Tim squeezed his eyes shut. No, somebody *had* told him that once, a long time ago.

Memories of his childhood sprang to the surface, vivid and precious. Learning to crawl, fly, and run, little claws scratching tile and his flames burning the curtains every other day. Jack laughing through it all, lifting him into his arms and saying "You're perfect," as Janet nodded matter-of-factly beside him, both equally accepting of Tim as he was. It had been so simple, so idyllic, back then.

Tim wanted that here and now, with these humans too. And with Bruce holding him in his arms, clearly as uncomfortable putting his feelings into words as Tim was, it felt possible.

"Okay," Tim said. "We can try together."

Morals were messy, humans didn't make sense . . . But Tim supposed that to them, dragons were just as strange. They'd have to keep messing up and meet each other in the middle for this to work. But it'd be worth it, without a doubt. Tim's bond with the Waynes could be as strong as Jack and Janet's. They just needed to put in the work.

"Thank you, Tim," Bruce said, losing the tension in his shoulders. "We'll figure this out, I promise."

They hugged for a long time, out of words and too full of feelings to communicate any more. But they were good feelings, so Tim decided to leave them be. He'd process them later (never), but for now he focused on the texture of Bruce's sweater, the smell of polish, and the gentle beat of both their hearts.

"Are we done being emotional?" Tim asked later, once his eyes were starting to droop.

"Yes, unless there's anything else you want to talk about," Bruce said.

Tim pulled a face. "*No.*"

Between this and Babs, he'd had enough feelings to last a lifetime.

Bruce sighed in relief. "Thank God."

Classic Bruce. A human after Tim's own heart.

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Trying wasn't easy. It meant redrawing boundaries, figuring out what rules were bad, and worst of all— *communicating* about feelings more, which was as bad as clothes shopping.

Tim's one comfort was that Bruce was suffering just as much. Neither of them liked being vulnerable, especially around people they loved.

The solution was PowerPoints. Tim herded his humans into the media room for family night to go over the Tim Drake Lecture Series, because it was important they got a dragon's perspective on things. Not just any dragon either— *their* dragon.

Tim hated explaining things the way cows hated being taken to the slaughterhouse, but he managed to choke out enough sentences about being unable to function without knowing his hoard was safe that they understood it wasn't hyberbole.

“So, you see, if I hypothetically killed someone who hurt my hoard, it would be for a good reason,” Tim said. “And given my species, *only* killing one person would have been me showing herculean restraint.”

He pointed at the screen, which had an incident report from the 1890’s of an African dragon systematically razing and slaughtering an entire village because one resident cut down its favorite tamarind tree. The casualty report made some of Gotham’s rogues track records look benign.

“Premeditating a careful murder does seem less bloody than that,” Dick said, grimacing at the amount of carnage listed. The dragon has been thorough.

“Exactly,” Tim said. “But it’s all hypothetical, so no fuss no muss.”

“Indeed,” Alfred said pleasantly, slipping in to set down another tray of cookies. “Thank you for the lovely comparison, Master Tim. It is most informative.”

Tim beamed. Communication, successful!

Of course, just because they were trying didn’t mean it went smoothly. Bruce told Tim he understood there were certain, biological reactions to losing Hoard (not to mention the emotional trauma), but that didn’t give Tim a pass on patrol. Excessive violence and murder of run-of-the-mill-thugs was still not allowed.

“Sure, but if one of them kills you, I’m getting even,” Tim said. “Like I would have with the Joker if he hadn’t been killed by some heroic, unknown, Gothamite.”

Bruce pulled a face, and Tim could tell it was taking him every ounce of self control not to immediately say no, but Tim wasn’t phrasing it as a question. Revenge would happen whether they liked it or not. Them being aware of that fact was the only compromise Tim was willing to give.

They were working on it.

Cass was a tough cookie. She saw the world in even starker contrasts than Bruce did. Tim could tell she was frustrated, but neither of them knew how to talk it out. Tim was bad at verbalizing feelings and Cass was bad at verbalizing in general. It made coming to an understanding difficult.

Eventually, they found themselves curled up in the attic. Another dance show was on and Cass was wrapped around Tim's arm, determined to cuddle despite their moral differences.

"Mad at you," she said. "Confused."

Tim hummed. He let himself shift halfway and wrapped his tail around her leg. One of his wings made a canopy over their heads, like a secret fort.

"Don't understand. Killing is bad," she said. "Bad like Cain. You bad, Timmy?"

The TV's background music was drowned out by the sound of their breathing. Tim rested his chin on her shoulder and thought about it.

"I don't think I am. Do you?" Tim said.

Cass shook her head. "No. You *good.* That why . . . Confused."

"Feeling are hard," Tim said. "They confuse me too."

Once, his middle-school teacher had done the trolley problem in class. They said it was an exercise to show how humans valued life. Tim had stared at the board in confusion, because unless his hoard was on the rails he didn't care who got hit by the train. (And if his hoard ended up on both tracks, he'd simply rip apart the train and dismantle the rails.) What had seemed straightforward to his peers was a mystery to him, and that went for a *lot* of human things. Cass was much the same, just on the opposite end.

"Bad people kill," she said quietly. "I don't want you to be bad."

Tim hugged her tighter. He was getting good at hugs, all his unwilling practice was paying off. “Would you still love me if I was?”

The credits rolled on the screen, calling curtains for the dancers. Names upon names of people neither of them would ever meet, lit up with blue lights as the episode ended. An infomercial started to play, and Cass muted the TV.

“Yes,” she said. “Always. Even if mad.”

Tim tucked his head, glad she couldn’t see his face. He was frozen with a sudden burst of emotions. Cass didn’t like murder. She’d been through things that made Tim’s blood boil, and he wouldn’t have blamed her for being mad forever.

“I’ll always love you too,” He told her. “No matter if you’re good or bad.”

“I know,” she said simply, as if that thought had never crossed her mind.

If Tim had been the crying sort, that would have been the perfect time for tears of joy.

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Tim texted Jason once he was positive all the icky, emotional talks were over and Bruce had truly put the Joker case to rest.

It was a formality more than anything else, since Tim had all but admitted to murdering the guy with Jason’s help, but it was the principle of the thing. Bruce was choosing to let go of this case because he was *trying.* That meant the world to Tim.

And to Jason, as well.

“Now that you’re not going to lock me away and throw away the key, I’ll take you guys up on that offer for crepes,” Jason said, grinning from the bottom of the front steps.

Bruce was the one who'd answered the door. He made a tentative, hopeful smile, and let Jason inside. It was Saturday morning and the sun shone with radiant, winter light, painting everything with halos, but that small smile was more brilliant than all of it.

Tim felt something in him relax. Something bone deep and precious. It was finally over.

"I'll get the ingredients out," Tim said. "Don't worry Jason, Alfred's at his embroidery club again, but I'm a great chef too. Do you want squid or seaweed in your crepe?"

"Strawberries and clotted cream, actually," Jason said, quickly rolling up his sleeves. "And I'll be the one making them. You're not going *near* that stove."

Tim threw a book at his head. "Yes, I am. You and Bruce need to cry over the medical inaccuracies in this thing. Babs insisted. It'll built character *and* take your minds off dead clowns."

Jason raised his eyebrows as he read the summary on the back of the book. "A salacious murder mystery set in the Swiss alps, starring the stunning Detective Doggonit and his lovely assistant, Peach Passion? Why the hell do we have to read drivel like this?"

"I'll explain later," Bruce sighed. "But it's best not to anger Babs."

Tim nodded. Babs was not to be trifled with. Her knowledge of psychological torture was mighty indeed. Bruce wouldn't stand a chance.

"No kidding, only an idiot would get on her bad side," Jason said, already on the first page. He stopped replying, brow wrinkled at he fell into the reader's haze. It'd be hours before he resurfaced, bad book or not.

Bruce tugged Jason along to the parlor, nodding as the fearsome crime lord grumbled about clunky dialog. Tim smiled and went to make lunch.

He whipped the batter together, feeling lighter than ever. The Joker's death would stay a cold case. Bruce was letting go of his compulsive crime solving this once, and the hatchet would be well and truly buried.

"Seriously, B, listen to this. It's crazy," Tim heard Jason say from the other room. "A blow to the head like that would instantly kill someone—and the blood wouldn't ooze like that! Did the author even do blunt trauma research?"

"Perhaps it's an exagerr . . . What the hell?" Bruce said.

"I told you! This writer is a hack."

Tim carefully turned the fire alarm off before putting the pan on the stove. He heard the distant sound of pages flipping, and his humans continued to bond over whatever abomination Babs was making them read.

Smoke filled the air, and Tim breathed it in. No more crazy clowns hurting Tim's hoard, no more pointed comments about Tim's alibi, no more struggling to be understood. Tim's hoard was together and everything was perfect, just as it should be.

Chapter End Notes

Citrine is a semi-precious stone similar in appearance to topaz. Very pretty, and I wish I chad a collection of it like Tim does. (Oh, to be rich with zero impulse control, that would be the life).

Tim: So, now that you're 'trying,' does that mean the three rules can go away?
Bruce: Don't push your luck.
Tim: Aw man *stomach growls*

Unfortunately, letting the teenage dragon munch on random civilians is still a no-go, but at least Tim's home life is improving.

Tim *adds "make my own rules" to his life plan for once he's legally an adult*
All of Gotham *shudders*

Hot Date? You Mean Hot Mess

Chapter Summary

Dick enlists Tim and Jason for help.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim didn't hibernate, but something about February's cold, frigid air and bleakness of existence made him want to curl up in the fireplace and sleep until summer. Alas, dragons had evolved to stay conscious year round. The idea was that wakefulness made it easier to defend their hoards, but the downside was that Tim had to suffer through winter like everybody else.

. . . Which wouldn't have been so bad, except Dick had dragged him out of the house and was forcing him to mingle.

"Remind me why we're here?" Jason asked, looking as excited as Tim was to be out and about. Jason been reading another bad murder mystery before Dick grabbed him, threw him in the car, and drove away, and was still blinking the reading haze out of his eyes.

"I dunno," Tim said with a shrug, "because to live is to suffer?"

Jason squinted at him. "That was deep. Did you steal my philosophy book?"

Tim chose not to answer. He had a feeling Jason wouldn't be pleased about Tim and Cass' bonfire night earlier that week.

“Today is a brotherly bonding day,” Dick said, wrapping his arms around Tim and Jason. He was wearing an obscenely bright crop top and booty shorts. “We’re going to have a fun afternoon making memories and basking in the glow of our well-adjustedness.”

“Our *what?”* Jason said.

“How are we supposed to do that here?” Tim added.

Gotham’s shopping mall was incapable of forming positive memories. It was a crowded capitalistic sinkhole that smelled like gasoline and fried food, and was graffitied worse than a subway station. Tim hated it on principle.

“Malls are nostalgia personified,” Dick said. “Besides, it’s my duty as eldest brother to bring you here, my naive little bros. You need to experience joy, and I’m a connoisseur in it.”

“I don’t need joy, I have a hoard. I’m a *dragon,* not a brother,” Tim reminded Dick, eying the mattress store. They had bed displays begging to be tested, and he was willing to be that guinea pig. Patrol had been rough last night, and Tim needed to catch up on sleep.

“And I’m dead. The Wayne name doesn’t apply to me anymore,” Jason added. “I’m exempt from this torture session. Go get one of your Titans minions to go with you. They haven’t been around you long enough to see the loser you really are.”

“Don’t be that way, this is to celebrate Tim’s performance at school,” Dick said, wearing a smile so sunny it would burn people. “I know you’ve been too busy selling drugs to help with his English homework, but I’m committed.”

“How dare you,” Jason said. “I’m not *just* selling drugs, you asshole—”

A passing couple double-taked at those words, then walked away faster. Tim eyed their retreat with longing.

Dick leaned against the wall and smirked. “Sure, whatever stokes your ego, little bro, but let’s focus on the important thing; memorializing Tim’s success. He’s earned it.”

“No I haven’t,” Tim said. He’d done less than the bare minimum. The only reason he was passing his classes was because of those extra credit assignments Dick made him do last week, the *sadist.*

“Yes you did. And you’re both totally my brothers, species and legal status notwithstanding,” Dick continued. “But if you’re going to put up a fuss, then I’ll just be your surrogate mother for the day. Pick your poison.”

Tim loved when Dick got manipulative and schemey, but not when he was the victim. That was the face of pure evil, hidden behind a sunshine smile. Dick was a terror when he wanted to be.

“Why are those the options? There is something deeply wrong with you,” Jason said, rubbing his arms to ward off an invisible chill. “Fine, brothers it is, but you need therapy, you deluded nutcase.”

“Yeah, you do,” Tim said. Dick was delusional. Nobody could replace Janet. That was like trying to swap the sun with a used light bulb. Matching her mastery of motherhood was impossible; she was too perfect a parent.

“I’m going to ignore your absurdity, because you’re wrong. I’m the sanest out of all of us,” Dick said. He grabbed both their arms and started dragging them toward the nearest store.

“Okay, now you’re flat-out *lying*,” Jason said, digging his heels in.

Dick flashed his sunny smile again, and pulled harder. Tim gave up and let himself be dragged; if he didn’t resist, maybe it would be over quicker.

(All bets were off if they went into a clothing store, though.)

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They window-shopped for a while. Jason and Dick argued, Tim impersonated a rag doll until he got carried like a sack of potatoes, and several employees politely asked them to leave the premises. By the time they finished, Dick had a couple bags of random doodads and Jason had grabbed a first edition of some romance novel at the used bookstore.

Nothing called to Tim, so he didn't buy anything. He pretended not to notice Dick and Jason's sighs of relief at that (Tim tended to buy "too many" things when the mood hit him.)

Once the horrors of shopping were over, they hit the food court for lunch and sat down by the fountain in the middle of the mall to eat.

Tim collapsed onto the rim of the fountain, exhausted. His feet ached, the mall was *loud,* and there hadn't even been a rogue attack to make things interesting. He glared at his corn dog; cheap fast food was not worth this suffering.

"Every time I buy a pretzel from Aunt Annie's I get a doughy one," Jason said as he sat down, equally unhappy. The fountain bubbled ominously behind them. Tim wondered if the red water was from rust or a crime nearby. *"Every time.* There has to be black magic involved."

Dick reeled Jason into another side hug. "I blame Gotham's fast food chains. They're incapable of making anything correctly."

"No, it also happened in the Moscow airport," Jason chucked his pretzel into the nearest trashcan. "The franchise is out to get me."

"They do that. It's a conspiracy," Tim said. He dipped his corn dog into the water for extra flavor.

Jack had a similar problem with Burger King. Every time he went there, they undercooked his food and forgot to salt his fries. Jack wasn't one to hold grudges, but he was close to swearing a family blood feud between the Drakes and that franchise. The only thing stopping him was the fact that Janet and Tim would take it seriously, and it would be difficult to explain why two dragons ripped apart a burger store to the news. But if the pretzel humans were after Jason, then Tim could change gears and eliminate them. Bruce wouldn't mind; nobody wanted Jason to die again, and choking on a doughy pretzel would be an awful way to go.

“Aw, Little Wing, don’t worry, Aunt Annie’s can’t hurt you. You’re just imagining things,” Dick said.

“I’m not imagining shit, Dickface,” Jason scowled.

Dick stood up and brushed the crumbs off his vest. “You’re right, that’d imply you *had* an imagination. Anyway, now that our lunch date is finished, it’s time for business. I need your help.”

“I knew this was too good to be true,” Jason grumbled. “God forbid we do any normal family things. There always has to be an ulterior motive.”

“What do you need, Dick?” Tim asked. His stomach was on the fritz, so he’d been picking at his corn dog until it was socially acceptable to throw away. His teeth were also aching *again,* and a distraction from that was more than welcome.

Dick flashed a grin. “I want you to make me look stupid.”

Jason and Tim looked at each other, then gave Dick’s hot pink crop top and tie-dyed booty shorts (complete with avocado green crocs) a once over.

“Yeah, sorry, I don’t think I can do much,” Jason said. “You’ve already got that covered.”

Dick threw his churro wrapper at Jason’s face. “No, idiot. The outfit is phase one. We need some Brucie level shenanigans to seal the deal. Come on, I know sabotaging galas was your favorite part of living at the manor before you died. Tim needs to learn to do it too.”

“I resent that.” Tim was excellent at sabotage. He didn’t need tips, though he appreciated the offer.

“Why do you want to be in the tabloids?” Jason asked, returning fire at Dick with a greasy napkin “Bruce already has the family idiocy in the bag.”

“Yeah, for *Brucie’s* reputation. It’s high time Richie’s IQ took a swan dive,” Dick said gleefully. “I already behaved too much for one day, anyway. The scales must be balanced.”

That was an understatement, although normally Dick just waited until patrol to be unhinged. There was no reason to go crazy now unless—

“Oh, this is for the fake dating thing you and Barbara are doing,” Tim said. “Why do you need to look dumb for that? Gordon already hates you.”

Every time the commissioner saw Nightwing on patrol, he gritted his teeth so hard Tim heard them grind from across the roof.

“Yeah, but that was before I punched that ableist sleazebag on Valentine’s Day,” Dick said. “I couldn’t let him talk to Babs like that, but now Gordon is starting to respect me. It’s horrible.”

He shuddered and gagged, like the very concept was vomit inducing. Perhaps it was. Dick was weird, always telling Tim to respect authority figures and then turning around to harass all of his. If there was a degree in double-standards, Dick would have his master’s.

“Oh yeah, I’d forgotten about that. Good job breaking his jaw,” Tim said. Someone had uploaded a video of the incident online. It painted Dick is a great light. No wonder he wanted some bad press; it was impossible to disappoint a future-father-in-law by being a good person.

“Thank you,” Dick said. “It was the highlight of my day.”

“Wait, when did this go down?” Jason said, food war forgotten. “Who was treating Babs badly, and why didn’t you tell me? I’ll pay them a visit. The Red Hood is always down for target practice.”

Jason cracked his knuckles menacingly. Tim scooted closer to him, fond.

Dick crossed his arms. “Last time I tried to call you, you said you were “transcending family” and had no time for my nonsense. Not my fault you missed the tea.”

“You should have told me there was tea!” Jason said. He kicked at Dick’s shin. “Besides, Bruce and I have been talking. Jason Todd might officially even come back from the dead someday. You know, if I feel like it and you bribe me a lot.”

“Great. Anyway,” Dick said, dodging the strike, “as I told Tim and everyone *present* in my life, Babs has revenge on that guy handled. My job is to focus on making our mutually platonic fake relationship look doomed to fail, white knight tendencies notwithstanding. It’s very cathartic.”

“Sure, that tracks,” Tim said. Dick and Barbara looked demoniacally joyful the redder Gordon’s face got. Tim could support fake romance for a cause like that, even if it was gross. Besides, better Gordon than him. Tim was *not* ready to be involved with more of their schemes. His mental scars from Babs’ shopping trip were still healing, and Dick’s obsession with PTA meetings was painful enough *without* another layer of evil on top. Gordon’s sacrifice was much appreciated.

“Babs is terrifying,” Jason agreed. “I don’t know how Gordon raised a devil like her, and you’re crazy for willingly being a part of her scheme.”

Dick draped himself over Tim. “Oh, Jason, you sweet summer child, I grew up with her. Once Babs has an idea, there’s no stopping her. Joining her is self-preservation. Besides, Gordon needs karma. The dumber I act, the more likely he is to go so bald even his mustache falls off.”

Tim tried to picture Gordon without his facial hair, and shivered. Some things weren’t meant to be seen.

Jason did not look disgusted. His eyes widened like he was envisioning something truly beautiful. “Dude, seriously? You think you can make that happen?”

Dick squeezed Tim like a stuffed animal. Good thing Dragons could hold their breath for over an hour; Tim couldn’t breath. “Like, 50-50. Yesterday, I hinted to him that I want to come clean to Babs about the vigilante thing. I think he almost had a heart attack.”

“This is amazing,” Jason said. “I’m in. Tell me what to do. I love harassing cops.”

Huh. That explained why he roasted Dick so much.

Dick clapped his hands in delight. “Perfect! Don’t worry, messing with Gordon is child’s play. Just do something that makes me look as smart as a sea slug and half as coordinated.”

“Easy,” Jason said, pulling Tim out of Dick’s arms. Tim gasped for air once free from the octopus hug. “I’ve already been doing that for years.”

Jason hooked an ankle around Dick’s leg and shoved him into the fountain. Several pigeons took flight into the rafters, and people screamed as the rusty, contaminated Gotham water splashed everywhere.

Dick sputtered and wiped his bangs out of his hair, then grinned. “Thanks Jay!”

“Literally anytime,” Jason replied. “Now, what’s next on your list? We gotta make you look so bad even the tabloids won’t touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

“That’s my little bro. I knew I invited you here for a reason.” Dick said. “Come on Tim, humiliation awaits!”

Tim smiled as his humans dragged him toward another corner of the mall. Today was turning out pretty good.

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By the time they called it quits, Dick had fallen into three fountains, lost his crop top, parked in the middle of the street, and walked into eleven glass doors. He’d also loudly asked people if vegan was a country and whether poodles were dogs or roombas with mop attachments. Tim kept a tally of how many people recorded him on their phones for fun, and found some of the videos trending on Tiktok on the drive home. A lot had the tags #Himbo King and #Eat the Richie. Ew.

“You owe me for this,” Jason said from the passenger seat.

“You *like* making me look stupid. Satisfaction is your payment,” Dick replied as they pulled onto the Manor drive. He ran his fingers through his hair. A shower of sparkles rained down onto the leather seats. Alfred would hate that, but setting off those glitter bombs was worth it.

“Lies! I deserve extra compensation for having to watch you do the Brucie laugh.” Jason said.

“He has a point,” Tim said, lying on the backseat without a seatbelt on. He was exhausted and about to fall asleep. “It was pretty creepy.”

Dick so good at altering his voice that it sounded *exactly* like Bruce. Tim was both impressed and haunted. There was nothing weirder than looking up, expecting to see his favorite human, and then it *not* being him.

“Really feeling the love here,” Dick said. “Nothing says family like roasting your poor, himbo brother.”

“Not a brother,” Jason and Tim reminded him, even though Jason was totally lying.

“Ah, yes, the dulcid tones of rejection,” Dick said. “Reminds me of my lonely childhood.”

Jason snorted. “You had an entire rogue gallery to play with *and* your Titans team later on. Quit whining. I had it way worse.”

Dick moaned something about being a misunderstood child forced to spend all his time with uncommunicative old men (Bruce and Alfred). Jason countered that with growing up with *two* emotionally challenged old men *and* Dick in his teenage-dirtbag era, and the arguing was back in full swing.

It was very theatrical, and Tim was sure it was in good humor, but just in case he flopped forward and patted their heads once they’d pulled the car into the garage.

“There, there, you’ll alright, I’ve got you,” he said.

None of his humans would be lonely. Tim would make sure they got the social stimulation they needed to stay happy, and that was a promise.

“Aw, thanks Tim,” Dick said. “We love you too.”

Jason grunted in agreement, just like Bruce would’ve.

Tim decided that was plenty communication for one day, and rolled out of the car. Time to text Bart, then take a nap.

***

Dick’s smear campaign on himself was successful. Several magazines ran articles about his recent weirdness— such as buying a yacht with more money than most people made in three years, confusing diets for political ideologies, and pitching limited edition cereal flavors to every food company on the East Coast— and the public consensus was that Bruce’s Wayne’s oldest son had lost what few marbles he’d had.

“The only thing that’d make me happier is if my transfer to Gotham PD went through,” Dick said, staring lovingly at the frames he was putting the articles in.

Tim looked up from his hoard scrapbook, which was surrounded by piles of candid photographs of his humans. “It didn’t? But you’ve been working in Gotham since mid-January.”

It was almost March. Tim thought the transition had been cleared during the search for the Joker’s body. Dick had been living at Wayne Manor most of the time since then—aside from when he crashed at the Clocktower.

“Eh, office politics are weird,” Dick said, hanging the largest frame on the wall. “My boss, Amy—she used to be my partner, before I got our old boss fired for colluding with the mob—*really* likes me, so when I put in my transfer she threatened to shoot me and refused to put the papers through.”

“Wow,” Tim said, “you must be her favorite.”

Actively hurting someone to keep them close was a whole other level. Janet would probably like her.

“Oh yeah, she’s great.” Dick said. “Anyway, after I submitted the files without her approval, I thought it was over, but she called Gordon and threatened him too. Bludhaven *really* doesn’t want to lose its best detective.”

Tim glued down another photo of Red Hood giving street kids chili dogs. “She what?”

“I *know.* There’s been a Cold War between both cities ever since,” Dick said. “They worked it out so that I spend three weeks in Gotham and one in Blud. Amy’s been hinting at me to move back if Babs and I get married. I’ve got a trust fund, but the pay bump she’s offering is great.”

Tim blinked. “Married?”

“For the bit, but that’s only if Gordon’s sanity lasts that long. Babs is in this for the long haul,” Dick said nonchalantly. “I hope it doesn’t come to that though; it’s not easy being in two departments in two separate cities. Actually, I don’t even think it’s legal. Luckily, Babs and I have contingencies to speed up our timeline if the work gets to be too much.”

“Cool.”

Tim was more concerned with the matrimony casually slipped into the conversation. Was Dick serious? That seemed serious. Jack always said that marriage was the most sacred thing in existence and should not be treated lightly.

Getting married to annoy one’s future father-in-law seemed pretty light.

Dick glanced over and must have seen the conflict on Tim's face, because he smiled and wrapped him in a side hug. "Hey, don't stress, Timmy, it's all good fun. Babs and I wouldn't be doing this if we weren't on the same page. Trust me, we've got it all planned out."

Dick tousled Tim's hair, then went back to hanging his tabloid articles on the wall.

Tim stayed where he was and frowned. Dragons didn't *have* romance. When they wanted to mate, they fought to the death with their potential partner, did the dirty, then flew as far apart in opposite directions at *best.* (Usually one of the dragons ended up dead. Often, the male. Janet and Jack's relationship was a bizarrely wholesome exception.) There weren't courtship rituals or *feelings* to confuse things, and mated pairs were almost unheard of, devotion to each other notwithstanding. Tim was out of his element here.

"Hey Tim, hold this up. I need to make sure it's hung properly," Dick said.

Tim got up and grabbed the frame from him.

Oh well. If romance wasn't his wheelhouse, it wasn't his wheelhouse. Bruce had agreed that Tim shouldn't feel ashamed or nervous about not "getting" human things, and romance was clearly in that category. Best to leave it to the experts, even though Tim *still* thought using love as a prank was dumb.

Dick and Babs could have their fun. Tim just had to pray they wouldn't use him as a prop for their schemes. Tolerating Dick's PTA-mania was bad enough.

Chapter End Notes

Dick: I love my brother, but as the eldest son, it's my duty to roast him mercilessly.
Jason: I can't believe people think you're the nice one.

I've been teasing Youngest Sibling all year (lol) about being an inch shorter than me. I have to do it before they get any taller, it's a sacred duty. Older siblings understand.

Armed To The Teeth

Chapter Summary

Tim *minding his own business*

Puberty *sneaking up behind him with a baseball bat*

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, Anonymous posted an AMAZING drawing of Dragon Tim. It's the best thing ever, and looks EXACTLY like how I picture him. ❤️Y'all NEED this image in your lives, it is literally perfection!

Link: https://archiveofourown.org/works/51481789

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first week of March, Tim woke up knowing something was very wrong.

He laid in bed for several minutes, blinking sleep from his eyes as he tried to figure out *what.*

The mystery was solved when he got up and glanced into his bathroom mirror. Tim wanted to hit himself for being so forgetful. He'd been so preoccupied with covering up the Joker's murder and bonding with his hoard, that he'd forgotten about puberty.

Too bad puberty hadn't forgotten about him.

Another developmental mile marker, yay.

Tim admitted to himself that he had no idea what to do. He'd thought the worst of this growing up nonsense was over. This shouldn't have happened for at least another decade. Sure, Janet had told

him to watch out for it, but they'd all put it on the back burner because Tim was so young. He was supposed to have at least one more molt before this happened. It didn't make *sense.*

Tim rubbed his eyes, too tired for this. He wished he could call Janet—or even Jack—to puzzle over this together, but they were in Papua New Guinea for the week and didn't have WiFi. Tim was on his own.

Which was fine. He was a dragon; he didn't *need* anybody to walk him through this. It was just that this was actually kind of crazy, and he would appreciate another shapeshifting dragon to give him a few pointers before he lost what little control he had.

Tim pressed his face against the glass of the mirror and groaned. Okay, maybe he did want a little help, but that was just his weak human DNA acting up, and Tim knew better to pay any attention to *that*. He just had to deal, even though he *really* didn't feel like figuring out out why his body decided now of all times to jump the developmental gun. He had a feeling this would be much more annoying than his molt.

. . . But now that he was thinking about it, he hadn't been alone for *that.* And the Waynes were always saying he could go to them for things. Maybe Tim didn't have to suffer in silence?

Tim hummed, then shrugged. It was worth a shot.

***

Two minutes later, Tim knocked on the door frame to Bruce's home office, aiming for casual. Bruce was working from home today, and he was always happy for a distraction from his paperwork.

"B, can you help me?” Tim asked, resisting the urge to swallow. Bruce wasn't a dragon expert, but he was level-headed in a crisis. This wasn't a crisis, but Tim could use someone unflappable until it was resolved.

Bruce squinted at Tim through his reading glasses, looking grateful for the distraction. “Of course, Tim. What is it?"

The gag reflex became too much to resist. Tim hacked a mouthful of spit onto the floor, followed by a canine.

"My teeth are dissolving."

"What?"

***

So there were still things Tim didn't know about dragons. Or, more accurately, about how his human and dragon forms interacted, but it wasn't like there was a manual. Janet had already been fully grown by the time she got her reverse magical girl transformation. Clearly, there were still a few bugs to iron out.

One of those was that Tim's adult venom was coming in, and unless he was *really* careful, it carried over to his human form. Hence the dissolving teeth and slightly deadened taste buds. It also had a weird aftertaste; Mentos with a hint of gasoline.

Good thing dragon teeth grew back almost instantly. Tim would have hated getting dentures before turning sixteen.

After Bruce's initial surprise wore off, he herded Tim to the Batcave to run tests. Tim was still sitting in the medbay hours later, kicking his feet while Bruce ran samples of his saliva. It was difficult because the vials kept dissolving.

"Are you sure you're okay? It's not hurting you?" Dick asked worriedly. As soon as Bruce told him about the “scaly situation,” he'd raced home and had been hovering nonstop.

His fretting only got worse once the Waynes analyzed Tim's venom and realized how toxic it was. Tim was a juvenile, so he didn't know how to manipulate its strength, and was still learning how to control it. Whenever he got distracted, he started dripping corrosive acid onto the floor. Good thing he wasn't a female, their venom was twice as strong.

"I'm fine. I'll just keep my insides draconic," Tim said. "It's no big deal, I do that anyway."

One of the first things Tim had learned as a child was how to keep his dragon stomach even while in human shape. Humans had terribly inefficient digestive systems. They couldn't stand up to the wear and tear he put his body through, which is why both Tim and Janet had learned to improvise.

" . . . That would have been nice to know a year ago," Dick deadpanned. "You know, so we didn't think you'd get infectious diseases from eating street animals."

That explained why they'd made Tim get so many shots last summer.

"You're detectives. You should have figured it out," Tim replied, then spat out another tooth. It melted into a puddle and burned a hole through the metal floor.

" . . . You sure that's not straight up acid?" Jason asked. He'd snuck in to raid the first aid kit for Wonder Woman band-aids, then got sucked into the drama. "It goes through solid steel."

Tim smiled as a new tooth slotted into place where the old one had been. His venom immediately started dissolving it too. "Isn't it great? I'm like a Xenomorph from Alien!"

One of his favorite films, even though the monster sadly never got to eat the cat.

Tim had always had a nasty bite. With the amount of things he put in his mouth it would be weird if he *wasn't* a walking biohazard, even with Sensodyne Extra Mint toothpaste waging war against his mouth's bacteria every night, but now that inherent toxicity would finally be put to good use. It was great to finally be old enough for proper venom. Janet was going to be delighted when he told her it'd finally come in.

"I can't believe this is my life," Jason shook his head. “I miss the good old days when the weirdest things in this city were penguin men and plant ladies.”

“Poison Ivy is overrated. She never uses the fun pollens anymore,” Tim said, tilting his head back, so he didn't drip more venom on the floor.

Jason muttered something about Doctor Isley “finally learning to be careful with her damn flowers” and wandered off, probably to update his fanfic or Skype Talia again. He *technically* wasn 't supposed to call her, but a good third mom was hard to find, so everyone turned a blind eye to them keeping in touch. As Bruce put it, he was glad Jason had *one* good thing to come out of his Assassin training days, even if it was a murder-mom with zero morals who was also part of an eco-terrorist mercenary cult.

Tim hoped Jason would stay the night at the manor. He only visited twice a week to stop Tim from kidnapping him or sneaking into Crime Alley, and that wasn't *nearly* often enough. Tim bet if he played up his symptoms, Jason would forget to go home, and maybe even read him another encyclopedia. Hoard time, get.

“—immy,” Dick said, “are you listening?”

Tim swallowed another mouthful of acid and nodded. “Totally.”

Dick's wry look said he wasn't fooled, but luckily he didn't call Tim out.

“As I was saying, Tim, we're glad you came to us when this happened instead of hiding it. We don't want any more cultural misunderstandings, so this is a big help,” Dick said. “Is there anything else we should be on the lookout for?”

“Even minor details are important,” Bruce added. He was still at the Batcomputer, analyzing the dozens of ways Tim's deluxe anticoagulant, three-finger acid venom could kill someone if left untreated. Getting an antidote made was at the top of the priority list.

“I already told you guys the important stuff,” Tim said. “This was a complete surprise.”

Puberty was a no-brainer; growth spurts, molts, increased hostility, heightened hoard instincts, and, of course, the dreaded separation issues, which fortunately hadn't hit Tim too hard yet. Those were a universal dragon problem, and the reason they were so territorial. Once they chose their stomping grounds, they rarely left.

Janet was the exception, since she'd essentially traded her entire previous hoard for Jack, which Tim couldn't even wrap his head around doing. But even she preferred to have Jack within earshot

at all times. Tim knew it was only a matter of years before he started having difficulty spending time away from his humans . . . Although, now he was wondering if years was even an accurate timeline.

Tim had noticed his teeth were aching, but he hadn't given it much thought. He lost teeth all the time (perks of his jaw's PSI, shattering teeth was a regular occurrence), so adult-venom hadn't even been on his radar. Dragons didn't usually get that until the *end* of their juvenile phase.

Tim made a mental note to talk to Janet about that. Either he was an early bloomer or the magic was messing up his developmental markers. *Great.*

"At least you're not in pain." Dick said. “Aside from your teeth, you seem to have immunity from your acid cocktail.”

That was a sigh of relief. Tim wasn't phased by violence, but dragon venom was horrific. He didn't want to die from it. The prospect of dissolving from the inside out was *not* appealing. Only his prey deserved a death like that.

Speaking of which . . .

"Do you think Alfred's done with lunch?” Tim said. “I'm starving.”

Dick handed him a vanilla pudding. "No solids until your teeth are all back."

Tim rolled his eyes. Dick was such a mother hen. They regrew in seconds, it was nothing to worry about.

Tim took a bite of pudding. His spit melted the metal spoon in half. He and Dick stared at the remaining chunk in silence. A bubble of leftover acid sizzled on it, turning the stainless steel into goo.

Well.

This was going to take some getting used to, but at least solids wouldn't be a problem.

***

It took a week for Tim to figure out how to control his venom. Alfred had to buy an entire new set of silverware, and Tim was exiled from using it until he didn't accidentally swallow liquidized chunks of metal.

Tim would have raged about the unfairness of it all, except he knew how much Alfred liked good silverware and had *no* intention of getting (any further) on the man's bad side, so for once Tim gave into his humans' demands without a fuss.

Jack was proud of Tim for that level of restraint, once they had enough signal for Tim to update them on everything.

“And you're *sure* it's not hurting you?” Jack asked Tim again. “There are no side effects?”

“Dad, we've been over this a million times,” Tim said. “Bruce sent you the chemical readings, I'm *fine.* I just hope there are no more weird puberty things I need to watch out for.”

His human and dragon shapes overlapped in the randomest ways. None of them had a clue how to predict that. Tim prayed the worst of it was behind him. Concentrating hard enough to produce human saliva instead of venom was difficult, and he'd had to miss several days of school because of it (although that was a perk).

“Alright. I'm just concerned,” Jack said. “If anything changes, let us know. I'll be over as fast as I can.”

“Thanks,” Tim said, glancing at Janet. They had a silent conversation, vowing to keep Jack away from Gotham. As fun as a rematch with his mom sounded, Tim didn't want his dad to cry again. He'd rather lose a limb.

“Oh, are those other dragons still hunting you?” Tim asked. “It's been almost a year.”

“I think we lost them,” Jack said. “Lucky us, isn't that right, Jan?”

Janet glared at him, which was such a mood. Tim felt for her. If he weren't tied down by his increasingly large hoard, he'd be challenging as many danger noodles to mortal combat as he could find, yet she'd been respecting Jack's wishes and *avoiding* combat. She was such a saint.

“We've been staying less than a month in each location and using false names for our flights,” Jack continued. “Your mother is also a wonder at evasion, so the few times one of them has noticed us they've had to abandon the chase.”

Tim nodded. He remembered *that* phone call, back in December. Janet had jumped off an aircraft over the Atlantic, Jack in tow, and hid them on a whaler heading to Canada until the rival clan lost their scent amongst the scent of blubber and blood. Pretending to be fisherman for a couple days had been annoying, but Tim was fairly sure that had been where the Middle Eastern dragons had truly lost track of them. (Jack and Janet's pilot had been very confused when he'd landed and his passengers weren't aboard, but they'd gaslit him into thinking he'd taken off without them, and all was well.)

“I don't think all these hoops were necessary, of course,” Jack said, stroking his chin. “The first time we ran into those dragons, we'd been on an illegal dig in the middle of nowhere. We didn't even have permits, much less our actual IDs. Unless the dragons recognize us by scent, they won't know how to find us.”

Janet had ripped the only dragon they'd encountered to shreds, then mutilated the corpse, so the rival clan wouldn't know what his mother looked like. Violence solved so many problems.

“So, honestly, we could have come home much sooner,” Jack said, sounding *way* too insightful. “Pity, we'll just have to make that up this year. I've been thinking of a family trip to Acadia National Park, there's plenty of places to run around there, and I know both of you would love to swim in the ocean. There are plenty of whales that far north—”

Janet and Tim shared horrified expressions. Camping? *Again?*

“Oh no, I'm breaking up,” Tim said, crinkling an empty chip bag off screen. “We'll have to talk later, Dad. I can't wait for our vacation, though. It'll be so much fun.”

“You're not fooling me, son,” Jack said. “Come on, would it really be so bad? It's been nearly a year since I've seen you in person. I'm suffering withdrawal.”

Tim stopped fumbling for the end call button and deflated. He didn't like the sudden-death, lose-lose dragon showdowns whenever his parents came to town, but not seeing them was also hard, despite how necessary it was. Tim's instincts were getting stronger, and the only reason he wasn't flying off to drag Jack back to his nest was because Janet *would* murder him for that. She wouldn't even be able to help it; Jack was just that important to her. But Tim still missed his dad.

Strangely, he got an achy, sad feeling when he thought of his mother's absence too, but that didn't make sense. He wasn't hoarding *her*.

“Maybe we won't go camping, but at some point I *am* going to visit Gotham,” Jack said, hand on Janet's shoulder as he smiled at Tim. “We'll talk about it more over the summer, but I've only got you a few more years, kiddo. I want to make every second count.”

“Kay,” Tim said, equal parts excited and dreading it.

“I suppose if you are that insistent,” Janet huffed, looking similarly conflicted. Family reunions would be so much simpler if Jack let them maul each other.

Sharing a hoard member was hard. Fumbling through family rituals was too. Tim wasn't sure what would happen after he was eighteen, but he knew it would be different. Jack was always talking about “growing up” and Tim “being his own man,” but what that looked like was vague and confusing. All Tim knew for certain was that he'd be done with school, and have his hoard for the rest of forever. Where Jack and Janet fit into that was a mystery.

Jack smiled gently. “Thank you, sweethearts. That means a lot. Now Tim, you mentioned you've been giving the Waynes How to Be a Dragon lessons. How are those going? Tell me everything.”

Tim nodded and started explaining. The phone call lasted far longer than he was expecting, but by the end of it, Tim felt pretty good, and Jack was beaming. Even Janet looked pleased once Tim

outlined how he was training his hoard.

Tim shelved his thoughts about the future. There were better things to focus on, like Jack's smile and Janet's reserved pride. Both made Tim preen, and he didn't want to think about losing either of them. Better to dwell on the present, which he *could* control, rather than years ahead when nothing was set in stone.

He had his family, his hoard, and everything he could ever want. Nothing mattered more than that.

Although . . .

Tim glanced at his Bat-laptop. There *was* one thing that was still eluding him.

“Hey Dad,” Tim said, interrupting Jack's story about his intern's Master thesis, “do you have any advice on hanging out with friends?”

Young Justice's group chats were suspiciously empty, and Tim's facial recognition program needed a few more tweaks to be functional. Getting more data on how to socialize with them in the meantime was simply efficient planning.

After all, the Waynes wanted Tim to make more friends, but he already *had* them. Young Justice was great, and if Tim weren't so wrapped up with his Gotham hoard, he'd spend way more time with them.

Now that the Joker case was wrapped up and Tim's teeth were finally behaving, maybe that'd actually be possible.

Happy friend fun times, here he came.

Chapter End Notes

Tim *takes an interest in socializing with his peers*
Young Justice *gets a chill up their spines*

Dragon venom:

Dragons go overkill in every respect, so it's only right that in addition to aggression, insane bite force, claws able to cut through metal, and the ability to fly and breathe fire, that they also have lethal venom to kill any prey lucky enough to escape them alive. It varies species to species, but Tim and Janet's venom is a cocktail of different acids, toxins, and side effects. I primarily based it around the Xenomorph acid blood from Alien, Komodo Dragon venom, and Mamba snakes.

Because Tim is a juvenile—*cough* baby—he's still learning to control his venom's potency (young reptiles' bites are more dangerous because they use higher amounts of venom than adults), but once he gets the hang of it he can choose whether or not to activate it at all. So don't worry, he will bite many more people in the future: their flesh will only melt and refuse to clot if he wants that to happen. (RIP Bruce, there are going to be a lot of lectures about this once he gets the toxin report finished . . .)

I have since learned that the baby snake thing is a myth, and am reeling from betrayal at the hands of the Nature channel I watched as a kid

More notes about the venom:

Xenomorph blood: can melt through several layers of metal, extremely deadly. Here's a clip!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEqHJ1tomnk

Komodo dragon venom: it's an anticoagulant, which stops the blood from clotting, so the victim continues to bleed and goes into shock. You can read about it here:
https://a-z-animals.com/blog/are-komodo-dragons-poisonous-or-dangerous/
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1533313/

Extra: Tim's venom is also a three-finger venom, which is found in Mambas, King Cobras, and other venomous snakes. Very bad news, especially for humans. Here are some deets from Wikipedia. If you're curious, that's a great place to start reading for more information on it.

"The venom is predominantly neurotoxic, and symptoms often become apparent within 10 minutes. Early neurological signs . . . include a metallic taste, drooping eyelids, and gradual symptoms of bulbar palsy. Other neurological symptoms include miosis (constricted pupils), blurred or diminished vision, paresthesia (a tingling sensation on the skin), dysarthria (slurred speech), dysphagia (difficulty swallowing), dyspnea (shortness of breath), difficulty handling saliva, an absent gag reflex, fasciculations (muscle twitches), ataxia (impaired voluntary movement), vertigo, drowsiness and loss of consciousness, and respiratory paralysis. Other more general symptoms include nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, sweating, salivation, goosebumps and red eyes. The bite of a black mamba can cause collapse in humans within 45 minutes. Without appropriate antivenom treatment, symptoms typically progress to respiratory failure, which leads to cardiovascular collapse and death. This typically occurs in 7 to 15 hours." —Wikipedia

Keep in mind I'm not a toxicologist or herpetologist, just a fic writer who went on a cursory research binge. Is it possible for these types of venom to coexist? I'm unsure, but since Tim is a dragon I'm taking creative liberty with it and adding acid on top. ;)

TLDR: Do not get bitten by a dragon, it will end very badly.

Every Breath You Take

Chapter Summary

Tim: You call it stalking, I say walking, just extremely close behind.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to part four; Young, Dumb, and Just. (Fun fact, this was supposed to be part 3, but stuff happened).

Chapter summary is lyrics from "An Unhealthy Obsession" by the Blake Robinson Synthetic Orchestra

Just FYI updates might be slower for a bit. I have some time sensitive real life stuff going down, so I don't have as much time for fic writing as I usually do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weekends were the best. No school, no internship, no dance lessons, lots of crime to fight, and best of all, *hoard time.*

“Bart!”

“Tim!”

They collided on the front lawn of Wayne manor, finally reunited after so many cruel days apart.

“It’s been too long, why do you have to live in Alabama?” Tim said once Bart finished strangling him. Bart was skinny, but he was pure muscle; his hugs were anaconda levels of suffocating. “You should stay here forever.”

“No metas in Gotham,” Bruce said. It sounded more out of habit that anything else.

“Besides, Max was clear he didn’t want Bart around bad influences,” Dick said, poking his head out the front door. He was buttoning his uniform, about to head out for a late shift at the precinct.

“I’m a great influence,” Tim said, offended.

“I meant Gotham in general,” Max said, arms crossed as he stared, unimpressed, at the distant skyscrapers. He’d run over to drop Bart off, something about not trusting his ward to get to Gotham without getting distracted on the way.

“Oh. Well, that’s fair,” Tim said.

Gotham wasn’t for the faint of heart. The average Homo sapien couldn’t comprehend the amazingness of Tim’s nest. Too bad Max was one of them.

“I want Bart back by 10:00 PM,” Max told Bruce. “He has a test he needs to study for.”

“Tests are for losers,” Tim said.

“Yeah!” Bart replied.

Bruce and Max shared Dad expressions. Dick pinched the bridge of his nose. Tim could *sense* the lecture brewing in him.

“I’ll do my best,” Bruce said. “Thank you for agreeing to this.”

“Only because keeping them separated is a fool’s errand,” Max said.

Bart had recently tricked his entire school into a brawl on the football field, and accidentally-on-purpose destroyed all of his home's electronics in a video game tournament with his cousin from the future. After that, Max decided regular outings with Tim were the lesser of two evils, and Tim was eternally grateful. Sneaking out was fun, but so was not going on the lamb every single time he and Bart hung out.

"I'll see you tonight," Max told Bart, giving him his sternest look, then vanishing in a blur of lightning.

If the guy wasn't such a stick in the mud, Tim would actually like him. He didn't waste words.

Bart poked Tim's cheek. "Hey, stop zoning out. You heard Max, we only have, like, five hours to hang out. We can't waste it!"

"Sorry Bart," Tim said. His speedster was right, there was no time to dilly or dally.

"Remember, don't do anything that would put you on the JLA's villain list," Dick said, throwing a comm and new tracker at Tim. "This is to help you guys get your zoomies *out,* not cause untold chaos."

Bart snorted, as he should. One did not simply tell a speedster to 'get the zoomies out.'

"Lay off, Dick," Tim said, pocketing the tracker. Bruce and Dick were getting very insistent he use them. "You're not my mom. Come on Bart, duty calls."

He jumped onto Bart's back, and the two of them dashed out of Gotham at the speed of sound, with permission from their legal guardians, for once.

***

By the end of the night, Tim was miffed.

He and Bart had gone to crash another Young Justice meeting, but Mount Justice had been empty.

Not just unoccupied; cleaned out, barren, a desert of fun times.

Red Tornado had stopped by to grab something, and was distinctly unimpressed with Tim and Bart when they demanded answers. He used some weird, Fruedien analogy about Ids and Egos to describe them that Tim objected to as a non-human, and informed them that the other teen heroes were looking for new bases because they were sick of grown-ups helicoptering their missions.

One week. That's how long Tim had been benched because of his new venom. *One week,* and he'd missed something as big as this. None of group chats even hinted about a base change; the next time he found Young Justice, he was going to sit them down for a 40-minute PowerPoint on communication skills. Their technology illiteracy was ridiculous.

Tim and Bart had to call it quits after a couple of hours scouring the nearby towns for teen heroes. Eventually, they'd settled for pranking Wally West again, and capped the day with video games in Gotham. Not a bad way to end a hangout, but there had been a severe lack of Kon and Cassie in the mix, not to mention everyone else.

"Don't worry, we'll find them next time," Bart said, before having to run away because Wally was on another war path. Whenever Bart pranked him, Wally chased him down, picked him up, and threw him into one of the Great Lakes. It was how the two of them communicated.

Tim waved goodbye as both speedsters restarted their Wily Coyote and Roadrunner impersonations.

When he got back to the manor, he told Bruce to tell Max that it wasn't his fault if Bart came home late and soaking wet.

***

Two weeks later, and still no dice.

Bart and Tim couldn't find Young Justice *anywhere* . It was *weird,* not to mention annoying. Here Tim was, willing to socialize, and his chosen targets were nowhere to be found; irony wasn't funny when it happened to him.

The only silver lining was that this spurred Tim to finally get his facial recognition program off the ground. It was glitchy and barely worked unless he ran it in the Clocktower, but it *worked.* Take that technology! Tim was lord and master of the inter-web, second only to Babs.

Tim's excitement lasted until he saw what state Young Justice was in.

"They're heroes, why aren't they going on missions?" Tim asked Babs, poking his computer screen unhappily. It showed surveillance feeds of his friends going about their daily lives, not a shred of spandex to be seen. His fellow teens weren't doing *any* vigilante stuff.

"It's called midterms, Timmy," Babs said, tapping away at a code so complex Tim got a migraine looking at it. "Most kids care about their grades."

"They need to be liberated from the system." Tim said. Gotham Academy was having exams this week, but did Tim care? No, he was above such petty things.

"Liberate your GPA instead," Babs said. "It's going to take a miracle to bring that thing up."

Tim pushed his swivel chair away from the desk and spun it in lazy circles. The Clocktower was lit up with a hundred screens; it made Tim's eyes ache. He should get some of those blue-light filtering glasses. He was too young for eye strain.

"I'll give you five dead rats if you stop Dick from making me study," Tim said. "Six, if you get him not to come to the school bake sale."

Babs made a few clicking noises on her keyboard. A portion of Gotham's power shut off, and the GCPD got an alert for a robbery in the Bowery. "Tempting, but I'll pass."

"Come on, we know I'll pass the exams anyway. Why waste my time?" Tim said.

Tim consistently got the minimum passing grades possible. He was an expert in only answering enough questions to skate by and leaving the rest blank.

Babs turned to fix him with an unimpressed glare. “The only time you’re wasting is ours. Stop resisting your education, Tim. Now, go make me some tea.”

Tim stuck his tongue out, but went to the kitchen to make her a cuppa. Because he was feeling petty, he put five teabags in lukewarm water and gave it to Babs with his most innocent expression.

“Tim, I know you know how to make tea properly. Go heat this up.” She said.

“According to you and Dick I don’t know anything, which is why I need to study,” Tim replied as he sank back into his chair.

“You’re a pest.”

“And you’re feeding into Dick’s delusions of parenthood.” Tim said. “Your point?”

Babs shrugged, but smiled. “You can’t blame me for seeking joy where I can get it.”

Tim gave her a disgusted look. Dick and Babs were menaces; she kept coming over to watch reality TV with him, and their social media accounts were full of pictures of them making out in public spaces. Tim was scarred whenever he logged onto Instagram. *Scarred.*

“I still think you should have shaved Gordon’s mustache off if you wanted to make him mad,” Tim said. “That would have been a less disturbing that your and Dick’s lovey-dovey act, and one with less casualties.”

It was Tim. Tim was the casualty.

Barbara snorted. “You haven’t seen my dad without a mustache. Trust me, this is less traumatizing. Besides, he needs to learn to back off. I’m happy with my life the way it is, I don’t need him sticking his nose in it. He keeps trying to set me up with his friends’ sons, even though I’m fake-dating Dick. Trust me, Tim, you’re lucky that your dad doesn’t play Cupid; it’s the worst.”

“Sure, whatever.” Tim rolled his eyes and turned back to the monitor.

Jack wasn’t allowed to comment on Tim’s love life, or lack thereof. He’d married a dragon, and even Tim and Janet knew that wasn’t normal human behavior.

Tim frowned at the computer screen. Boring, boring, boring. Nobody was doing anything fun; Kon was in Hawaii signing autographs at a convention, Bart was running around Alabama so fast that the only data Tim found on him were red blurs on military testing grounds, Anita and Cassie were studying together at a cafe, and Cissie . . .

Tim stared in horror.

Poor Cissie. She *lived* at school. She needed *help.*

“Don’t worry, Arrowette,” he whispered. “You’ll soon be liberated.”

Babs grabbed his collar before he could run to the skylight.

“Whatever you’re planning, no.” She said.

“It was just going to be a minor kidnapping—”

“No. Now sit down,” Babs said, “or I’ll remind Dick that there’s also a field trip next month he can chaperon.”

Tim returned to his seat with a hiss.

***

Since Young Justice wasn't fighting crime, Tim decided to support them from afar by sending messages to their civilian phones with tips on how to blend in better. They weren't good at going undercover, and their civilian IDs were super easy to crack. Kon was the exception because he didn't even bother with a normal life, but everybody else could use tips on how to stay under the radar.

Strangely, none of them seemed excited when he told them he'd cracked their identities and was spying on them with a homebrew Big Brother program.

Silly humans; Tim could track down *anything,* though in this case it'd be nice if he didn't have to. He really needed to give them that PowerPoint. How hard was it to reply to a text? And blocking his number was pointless, he didn't know why they kept doing that.

"Bruce, when you got adopted by your hero club, did you have to teach them basic communication skills?" Tim asked on the way to WE.

Bruce stopped at a red light at stared at Tim with his usual cocktail of amusement and confusion. "Tim, I helped found the JLA. They didn't adopt me."

"Uh huh." And Tim was a straight A student. "So anyway—"

"There were many PowerPoints involved," Bruce said. The light turned green. "Mostly about how to organize computer files."

Oh, those were good skills. Bruce must have really liked them to start with those presentations.

Tim made a mental note to add that to his list of lectures for Young Justice. As far as he knew, they didn't keep *any records* , which was a crying shame. Records were a way to hoard memories physically. Tim needed all of them filed for his peace of mind.

“I’m glad to see you’re making friends, champ,” Bruce said as they parked by WE’s main office. “It’s good for you to meet new people.”

“Agree to disagree, but my fellow teens are pretty cool,” Tim said. He looked up at the mega-corporation and grimaced. “Do we have to stay here long?”

“Just a couple of hours,” Bruce said. He had to drag Tim out of the car. “It’ll develop character.”

Tim went limp and let himself be dragged. Quality time with Bruce was great, but anymore of menial gopher work and his character would develop into a villain.

***

Tim wasn’t the biggest fan of his internship. It involved a lot of running around and menial labor. He suspected that the only reason Bruce hadn’t canceled it was because he liked it when Tim hung out with him in his office (which Tim also liked, because Bruce was the best).

However, there were moments when he got to shine, and Tim preened whenever they presented themselves. Like now.

The supervisor in charge of training this quarter’s interns had gotten sick, and the group of fresh victims was in dire need of guidance in the cutthroat, corporate world. Tim was the perfect solution to that problem, and a natural teacher.

“And of course,” Tim said, tapping the white board, “we can’t forget our main goal; slaughter—”

The door opened and Dick poked his head in. For once, he was dressed in a well pressed, normal suit. Too bad he ruined the image of professionalism by wearing a hot pink, glittery tie bedazzled with yellow rhinestones.

“Tim, there you are. I was . . . What are you doing?” Dick looked around at the half dozen interns staring owlishly back at him.

“I was teaching our new minions business strategy,” Tim said, putting the cap on his marker. “They’re really good at being lemmings, but WE didn’t become a powerful Final Boss company by hiring sheep. With me, they will become fierce wolves ready to take on the business world.”

He gestured to the white board where the how-to’s of being a corporate success were listed in neat handwriting.

1) be ruthless

2) destroy all competition

3) devour their resources and assimilate them into your own army

Each point was illustrated with stick figures with fangs and blood dripping from their teeth. Tim had used red marker for that part. He was very proud.

Dick looked from the white board to the interns, concern growing on his face when he saw how well they were paying attention.

“Should I be concerned?” Dick asked redundantly. He was clearly concerned already.

“No sir, this is quite informative,” one of the interns said. “It’s the highlight of my time here.”

“I’m learning so much!” another said.

Several more nodded. One of them stayed silent, locked into a death glare with the drawing of Chad the bodyguard being impaled. Tim had drawn it in the corner of the board, purely for personal aesthetic. Earlier the intern said that the picture was “staring at them like a demon from Hell,” so Tim assumed they were trying to assert dominance over it.

Did all teachers get power rushes from showing their students the light? This was great. Tim was a good teacher and interns were always power hungry. They made great underlings.

“Right,” Dick said, edging back toward the door. “Well, carry on then. Tim, when you’re done Bruce wants to talk to you.”

Tim nodded as he added more fangs to his version of the Wayne building. It needed more claws to properly devour the rectangle representing Lexcorp. Someday Tim would make it happen for real, but now he’d just have to content himself with artistic representations.

He added a few more entrails to Lex Luthor’s corpse with that in mind.

***

After the meeting, Tim went to Bruce’s office. Turned out, Bruce didn’t actually need him; he just wanted an excuse to get out of a meeting. Tim wished he could use the same excuse at school.

“Lucius is going to be mad at you again,” Tim told him, slumping against Bruce on the couch in his office. “This is his villain origin story.”

Bruce snorted. “Lucius is busy with a parental crisis. He doesn’t have time to go insane.”

Tim cocked his head. “I don’t think that’s how it works, and I wouldn’t call it a crisis.”

Most rogues went insane *because* they were too busy. No wonder Bruce didn’t graduate from college, if he didn’t even realize that.

“Trust me, it is,” Bruce said. “His daughter is as difficult as you are.”

Tim shrugged and pulled up his facial recognition program on his phone. Bruce was entitled to his own wrong opinions (Tim was a perfect child. He’d done nothing wrong in his life ever).

The program booted up in record time. Tim was glad he could finally run it on his own devices. Porting it to an app had been a fun after-patrol project, although Tim only got two hours of sleep because of it. Luckily, he’d napped a few hours at school.

Bruce read his work papers, occasionally notating them with red pen. Tim settled down and went over security feeds of his friends again. The app was glitchy so it probably wouldn't spot anything, but this was a good a time as any to troubleshoot—

Tim froze.

A traffic camera caught a blurry image of Empress in full costume, chasing a goth criminal through the streets, and another one got a photo of Arrowette and Secret fighting an unknown assailant.

They were doing *hero stuff*.

"Hey Bruce, give me a second, I'll be right back," Tim said, keeping his happy squeals inside where they belonged.

Bruce grunted and moved his arm off Tim's shoulders. Tim slunk into the hallway and beelined it to the fake janitor closet Bruce kept spare bat costumes in. While he walked, he texted Bart that Operation Friendship was on.

It was an hour earlier in Alabama, so Bart would have to skip his last period (he didn't have half day Fridays like Tim), but it was worth it. At long last, it was time to reunite with Young Justice.

After shoving his robin uniform into his bag, Tim snuck over to his only true ally at Wayne Enterprises, and readied himself for negotiation. No way would Bruce let him leave his internship early, so he had to be creative. Luckily, Tim had allies here, and he could count on them to help him channel his inner Houdini.

"Tam, I need a distraction," Tim said.

Tam glanced up from her desk, which was a mess of documents strewn on it. She looked at him the way an irritated truck driver eyed potential roadkill. Tim smiled wider.

He liked Tam; Lucius had dragged her into WE kicking and screaming a couple of weeks ago, declaring that she was getting an internship whether she liked it or not. Tam very much did *not* want, and spent ever waking moment hissing at people and aggressively stapling documents together. She was a whirlwind of teenage angst and hatred of authority, which made her Tim's favorite person at WE. Aside from Bruce, of course, but nobody could top Bruce.

"What?" Tam said, distracting Tim from recounting all the reasons Bruce was his favorite human.

He glanced around the office, then leaned closer. "A distraction. Just five minutes, that's all I need."

She snapped the stapler shut like it was a crocodile biting a gazelle's head off. "Do I want to know why?"

"Nope," Tim said. Tam wasn't in the the vigilante business, and he didn't feel like making up an cover. "Please? It can be as morally gray as you want. I just don't want Bruce to catch me leaving."

Bruce was cracking down on Tim's "forgetfulness" with trackers. Tim didn't want another lecture on keeping his humans updated on his location; *he* needed to know where *they* were, but it shouldn't have to go both ways.

Tam set down the stapler and glared around the office. Lucius had imprisoned her in the corner by the break room, but nobody was paying attention to either her or Tim. After a second of deliberation, she leaned over the desk as well.

"Alright, I'll do it, but you owe me." she said. "Just say the word and I'll cause some chaos. It's been getting *way* too calm around here anyway."

Tim beamed. Best summer intern, ever.

***

“Dude, how did you get out of there so fast?” Bart asked, poking his head around the corner. He’d been hiding behind a newspaper stand, Impulse costume hidden by a trench coat several sizes too big.

Tim grinned. “I have my ways.”

The fire alarm had gone off on Tim’s signal, forcing everyone to evacuate the building while the Fire Department was called. Tim figured Tam had pulled the one by the printer. Having an ally at WE was paying off, especially since Tam only needed the barest excuse to cause some good, old-fashioned trouble.

“Cool, a man of mystery. I like it,” Bart said. “You ready for some adventure?”

The excitement was palpable. Tim couldn’t wait to see Young Justice again. It had been too long.

Tim cracked his knuckles. “Bring it on.”

***

After stopping at a travel center for Tim to slip into his Robin costume, he called Tam to thank her for her help.

“No problem, it was fun,” Tam said. “Let me know if you need me to do it again. The more trouble I cause, the more likely Dad is to let me leave this godforsaken internship.”

“Sure,” Tim said, but he doubted her plan would work. Bruce still hadn’t let *him* be free of the corporate monstrosity that was WE, and Tim had even bit one of the interns a couple of weeks ago. (They’d been a corporate spy, so objectively they’d deserved it.)

Bart tugged on Tim’s sleeve. “Ask her how many fire alarms she pulled! I’m going to beat her record next time I’m in Gotham.”

Tim did, and Tam made a noise of confusion.

“I didn’t pull *any*,” she said. “I jammed the printer and set it on fire.”

Tim smiled. Wow, awesome. That was prime hoard material right there.

“You better be careful, or I’ll keep you,” he told her.

She scoffed and hung up. Tim moved her several ranks up on his friend-scale. Tam treated phone calls the same way Janet did, and it was the best thing ever. No wasted words at all!

“Come on Tim, it’s been five minutes, that’s basically forever,” Bart said, tugging Tim’s sleeve again. “The mission is going to be over!”

“Sorry,” Tim said. He pocketed his phone and jumped onto Bart’s back.

Tam was great, but currently, he had his hands full with Young Justice. Additional hoard members could wait until that mess was figured out.

Chapter End Notes

Why was Dick at WE? Because Alfred made him deliver something to Bruce, and Dick wanted to show off his incredible fashion at the main office.

Meanwhile . . .

Kon: Has anyone else been getting threatening texts from an untraceable number?
Cissie: You mean the ones about what we ate for lunch, who we talked to at school, and have personal information nobody should know?
Kon: yeah.
Cissie: Yup, all of us have been getting those. It's seriously creepy. I wonder who's sending them.

Justice Is (Color)Blind

Chapter Summary

Tim: I'm getting a good grade in socializing, which is both normal to want and possible to achieve.

Young Justice: *confused horror*

Chapter Notes

Still overwhelmed with five-thousands things, but the power of friendship and procrastination compelled me to finish this.

Thank you Ravengranger for the awesome beta, and for being the other half of my feedback loop as I drafted this monstrosity. Your cackles made my day! 😉

BTW, as you guys know, I use the 1998 Young Justice Team. No hate on the cartoon, but 90's disaster children are where it's at for me. There are a lot of them though, so here's the lineup:

Anita Fite: Empress. Voodoo ninja warrior, and daughter of a secret agent trying to stop Young Justice from causing wanton property damage. (It isn't going well).

Greta Hayes: Secret. A ghosty girl who I love with all my heart. She also at one point joins Darkseid, who she calls Doug, but that probably won't happen in my fic. *squints* I think

Bart Allen: The Impulse we know and love
Kon El: Superboy, my beloved

Cassie Sandsmark: Wondergirl. The ultimate Wonder Woman fangirl. Got her powers from walking up to Zeus and asking if she could have them. Weakness: Her mom. No, literally.

Cissie King-Jones: Arrowette. Her mother puts dance moms to shame and trained her daughter to be the archer-themed vigilante she never was. Cissie is currently a ward of the state because Green Arrow reported her mom to child protective services.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bart and Tim burst through the front door of Young Justice's base in a blaze of red static. Young Justice responded with violence: Arrowette shot an arrow, Secret turned into smoke, and Kon threw a crate at them.

Bart dodged easily and blipped into visible view, Tim still on his back.

"Hi guys," Bart chirped. "Long time, no see. This place is crash."

It was a warehouse, which was a step down from Mt. Justice. There were no cool computer interfaces or game systems, and beanbags were a foreign concept. Tim gave it a 2/10 on the Secret Base scale. The only thing it had going for it was that there were four walls and it was discreet.

"Oh, hello, Impulse, Robin," Anita said. Everyone quickly lowered their weapons once they recognized Tim and Bart. "Sorry for the alarm. It's good to see you again."

She didn't sound like it was good. She sounded *stressed* and distracted. So did everybody else. Tim and Bart exchanged a look.

"What's up, guys?" Tim asked, hopping off Bart's back. "Something got you fine, upstanding heroes in a pinch?"

He got some weird looks, but Tim was proud. Jack said humans responded well to endearments, and Tim had slipped those compliments in there normally and naturally. All those years of playing human were paying off.

"Yeah, it's the worst," Superboy said, sitting on a crate with a loud thump. "Some psycho is stalking us."

"What?!" Tim said in alarm. Who would *do* such a thing?

"It started with texts," Cassie said, pulling out her phone. "An unmarked number has been on all our phones. You haven't gotten any?"

“Nu-uh,” Bart said.

“My phone is encrypted,” Tim said. He didn’t even get spam calls.

“Lucky,” Kon muttered. “I’ve been getting texts about my personal life for weeks. It sucks.”

Tim bit back a comment that if Kon had just replied to *his* texts, Tim could have easily taken care of the problem. Hello, expert hacker right here! Humanity was not as smart as it made itself out to be.

“He calls himself Harm,” Cissie said. She was covered in blood and was sitting half-collapsed on a bench. “He’s a real creepy, douchey serial killer. He cornered me while I was on patrol and stabbed me with my own arrow.”

“Oh, did he now,” Tim said in a measured, calm manner, clocking the bandage on her shoulder.

He had the sudden urge to test his new venom on this guy. Bruce wouldn’t get too mad; it’d be for science.

“Don’t worry, it gets better,” Cassie said, slapping an ice pack on her knee. “He lassoed my ankle and dragged me through the streets on his motorcycle. It’s a good thing I don’t get road burn, or I’d be a grease smear on the highway.”

“He also may have downed me without even using kryptonite,” Kon said, looking thoroughly embarrassed. “He’s got some funky aerosol that stunned me. Not a good time.”

Well, it was official. Harm needed to die.

“Good thing Impulse and I are here,” Tim said, already making plans. *Nobody* touched Young Justice on his watch. They weren’t hoard (yet), but he liked them, and dragons liking people was *rare.* “Where did you last see him? I think it’s time we put an end to his career.”

The technology PowerPoint could wait a few minutes. Tim was planning a murder.

***

Tracking down Harm wasn't hard, given that he was tracking *them* down and apparently decided to commit mass homicide.

Tim had to hand it to the deranged lunatic, he was creative. They chased him across state lines, stopped him from taking hostages, and were actually struggling to corner him. Whoever Harm was under the thick layer of KISS-themed face paint he wore, he'd trained himself very well. Not to mention he had enough gadgets and gizmos to make a Bat proud.

Too bad he used them to kill people. That was a bummer, and targeting Tim's humans made it go from bummer to death warrant.

Eventually though, the chase began to wind down. Harm led them to Chicago for a final showdown, and the air was tense as they convened on a skyscraper to talk strategy.

Below them, the city swam with a myriad of lights, and cold wind cut through their uniforms like a knife. It smelled different than Gotham—less polluted, with a hint of rain. Tim eyed the streets below unhappily; he was adapted to urban environments, but it wasn't *Gotham,* and lacked the charm of his native environment.

"I'm beat," Anita said, lifting up her mask to wipe the sweat off her face. "This has been a long day, even for me."

Greta floated over to Tim, her form distorted with mist. "How are you not tired, Robin?"

Tim glanced at the sky. It was almost midnight, and Gotham was an hour ahead of Chicago. Young Justice (minus Cissie, who Bart ran to the hospital to get her shoulder looked at) were fatigued from the hours-long game of cat and mouse, but Tim was in fine form.

“I stay up later than this,” he told Greta. “Crime doesn’t sleep in Gotham. Speaking of which . . .”

Tim pulled out his phone, which he’d put on silent before his great escape from WE. There were a dozen missed calls from Bruce, several passive-aggressive texts from Alfred, and a message from Jason telling him that Batman was on a warpath trying to track him down. (Tim had forgotten his tracker, on purpose, oops.)

Apparently, Bruce was freaking out because after the fire alarm went off at WE, a gang stormed the building and took half the company hostage. Nightwing saved the day after a couple hours, but there were still some people MIA.

FavoriteZombie: *B thinks you were kidnapped, so for the love of Emily Bronte answer your damn phone, replacement. Otherwise I’m sending my goons out to look for body parts.*

Aw, Jason was such a softie.

Tim was almost tempted to do what he was told, but . . . no.

Contacting Bruce meant Bruce figuring out where he was and tracing the call. After that it’d only be a matter of time before the Dark Knight crashed Tim’s friend-time and ruined his chances of murdering Harm. So not cool.

His hoard could deal a little longer. Right now there was crime to stop and a bad guy to put down.

“What’s that, Rob?” Bart said, leaning over Tim’s phone. Tim spat out a mouthful of staticky hair. “Wooooah, that’s a lot of Bat-messages. Mode.”

Kon looked over with a wince. “Crap, is Batman is mad at you?”

“It’s no big deal,” Tim said, powering off his phone. Now he was truly unreachable. “He’s just freaking out because I snuck out.”

Snuck out, MIA. Same thing.

"Yikes," Kon said. "How are you so chill? That guy scares me more than kryptonite."

Tim was bemused. "Seriously? B isn't scary at all. You're letting his costume get to you."

Everybody but Bart gave Tim an odd look.

"Robin, it's *Batman,"* Cassie said. "One of the founders of the Justice League, a human that can take on Superman and *win,* and the world's best detective with a thousand-yard stare that makes villains turn themselves in. How is he *not* intimidating?"

Tim shook his head. "Those are charm points. He's harmless unless you give him prep time. When he's not in the suit, he's a disaster. That's why I'm around; *somebody 's* got to put the fear in criminals. He's way too nice."

The others looked dubious, but that was only because they hadn't seen Bruce walk face-first into a screen door and get bossed around by Alfred. Once someone saw that, there was no going back.

"I can't tell if you're making fun of us or not," Cissie said. "You're the weirdest person I've ever met."

Tim rolled his eyes. "From where I'm standing, *you 're* the weird ones."

Humans were such silly creatures. That hadn't changed after a lifetime of being around them. Tim doubted it ever would. Luckily, Tim liked that about them, even though it usually ended in misunderstandings and frustrations on his end.

"Yeah, the past is moded," Bart said, looking up from where he was counting cracks in the roof tiles. He'd been doing it for twenty minutes because he kept losing track around ten thousand. "When I master the Speed Force, I'm taking you all to the future so you can experience the awesomeness of anarchy."

“Uh, thanks, Imp,” Anita said, “but I think we’re happy with the present.”

Bart shrugged and zipped away, distracted by a falling leaf.

Tim grinned. Never change, Bart, never change.

He turned back to his binoculars and scanned the rooftops. They were hoping Harm would come to them and give them the terrain advantage, but Tim wasn’t holding his breath. Harm was too smart to take on their group all at once. He’d be lying low until making a move.

Luckily, the stalemate meant Tim could put Jack’s How To Be Human classes to good use. The refresher on small talk had been murder to get through, but Tim memorized all of it.

“So, while we’re waiting for Harm to try and kill us again, what are some of your hobbies?” Tim asked.

“Well, I like TV,” Kon said. “There’s this cool show—”

“Not the Werewolf Stalker one, please,” Cassie groaned. “That’s all you talk about.”

“It’s a good show!” Kon defended.

Cassie and Anita rolled their eyes, but Greta nodded excitedly and started talking about the time she turned invisible to sneak onto the film set.

Tim gave himself a moment to bask in his success. And the counselors at Gotham Academy thought he was a danger to his peers. *Ha!*

Back in kindergarten, Jack had been excited for Tim to make friends.

The first day of school, Jack had lifted Tim onto his hip and showed him the “Good Friends” chart on the fridge. Every day Tim had a successful, non-violent interaction with his peers, another gold star would be added. When Tim got ten stars, Jack would get him a prize.

Such a tactic might have worked if Tim had been a human child, but he was of the (rightful) opinion that most humans weren’t worth his time. Plus, they tasted good. So Tim didn’t get ten stars in a row that year. Or the next.

More than once, Tim had seen his dad staring at the barren “Good Friends” chart in despair. He’d been convinced Tim would be a lone dragon for the rest of forever, doomed to enjoy his alone time like a proper introvert.

Ha! If only Jack could see him now. Tim was *acing* this friendship thing.

Steph, Bart, Kon, Cassie, Anita, Greta, Cissie . . . Tim had more friends than he knew what to do with. It was a big win for him. His dad would be proud.

“You’re cool,” Tim told Greta when she finished talking about her foray into stalking. “As a fellow people-watcher, I commend your dedication to the craft.”

Although turning invisible felt like cheating. Then again, if someone had powers, it was a waste *not* to use them. And Greta’s mist powers were neat. She was one hundred percent bite-proof.

“O-oh, thank you, Robin,” Greta said, her cheeks becoming pearly with a blush. “Nobody’s called me cool before.”

“Oh, well I think you’re neat.”

“You think I’m *neat?”* Great clasped her hands together and grinned. Tim wondered how blood could rush to her face, seeing as how she didn’t have any. Another mystery to solve.

“Heads up,” Anita said from the edge of the roof. “I think I spotted him.”

The conversation was forgotten. Tim slipped into work mode, letting his focus sharpen as he scanned the the cityscape for his quarry. His nerves tingled with anticipation for another fight, and he swallowed back a mouthful of venom.

No biting. Bruce would be upset if Tim *actually* killed Harm. Bo staff and Batarangs only, unless one of the team was about to get hurt. If that happened, the claws were coming out.

***

Fighting Harm was chaotic, messy, and embarrassing. Tim was used to working with vigilantes, but not *these* vigilantes. Young Justice had different skill sets, *actual powers,* and no comms. It was a free-for-all as soon as they were out of earshot of each other.

Turns out, lack of communication was bad when you were fighting a villain good enough at strategy to take on an entire team by himself.

Tim was right; Harm had a plan. Said plan was calling in a favor with some rando called ToyBoy, who had beef with Superman.

Superboy was not Superman, but apparently they were “close enough,” which Tim found distasteful. Sure, he considered humans to be pretty similar (and usually boring), but Kon was special. More importantly, he was *nothing* like Bruce’s super. It was like comparing jam with mayonnaise.

But yes, Toyboy.

Toyboy was a tech-savvy criminal with access to a giant death robot. A robot that was now tearing up Grant Park while Toyboy set up bombs around the city. Big, explosive bombs that would go boom, which was why they had Bart running around to defusing them.

(Teaching a speedster with zero attention span how to defuse a bomb in five minutes was *not* easy, and Tim never wanted to do it again.)

While Bart did that, Kon and the other heavy hitters were fighting Toyboy's robot. Anita and Tim were supposed to stay together, but Greta had an episode when she saw Harm and started turning into a whirlwind of mist and terror.

"I think it's a panic attack," Anita had said, crouched near Greta as she muttered about jukeboxes and bathtubs the way Jason referred to crowbars. "Don't worry, I'm a voodoo expert. I train for comforting the dead."

Tim, allergic to emotions as he was, decided to leave Anita to it.

Which was how he ended up soloing Harm on a rooftop, no backup, no trackers, and no comms.

Just the way Tim liked it.

"I'm the only one allowed to stalk them!" Tim hissed, jabbing Harm in the stomach with his bo. "Go harass someone else!"

Harm rolled with the strike, then threw a bola around Tim's ankles. Tim went down, but transformed his fingers into claws and cut the cord. Out of uniform, that would have been a dead give-away to his true nature. But in the suit, Tim's partial transformation just made it look like his gloves had sharp, tapered fingers.

"You must be Robin," Harm said. "I've heard of you—Batman's sidekick. I'm going to enjoy leaving you in pieces for him to find."

Tim got up, then quickly did a back handspring when Harm tried to slit his throat with his large, overcompensating sword.

It didn't get his artery, but the tip of the blade nicked Tim's neck, so sharp he barely felt it.

“Get in line,” Tim scoffed as blood beaded from the cut. “You’re not the only one who wants to dismember me.”

Jason had dibs from his pit-mad-let’s-kill-Robin days. A few other rogues also wanted to (literally) cut him down a size. Apparently, Tim was very dismemberable.

Harm growled. Obviously, he wasn’t used to people not being intimidated by him. Please, Tim fought Gotham rogues. A wannabe metal-band reject was nothing.

Although . . . Underestimating Harm was a bad move.

He and Tim traded more blows. Tim blocked strikes from the guy’s sword with his bo and kicked him in the ribs at every chance. He kicked Harm in the jaw and heard a tooth snap, and Tim felt pretty great about that, but then things went south.

Tim suddenly felt wobbly. The world started to spin, and he could barely focus his eyes. Next thing he knew, Tim was on the ground with Harm standing over him, heel digging into his stomach. Ow.

Harm looked down at Tim’s prone form and chuckled with a laugh that *had* to have been practiced in the bathroom mirror. “How the mighty have fallen. What’s wrong, Robin? You’re looking green.”

Tim grit his teeth, eyes on Harm’s sword. The one that had nicked him a moment ago. “Shit.”

Poison, great. Ironically, not something Tim had immunity to, despite his venom.

“Don’t worry, it’s not lethal,” Harm said, angling the knife so it glinted in the moonlight. “Won’t even paralyze you, just make you weak enough for me to enjoy every moment as I kill you.”

“Wish I had a poison like that a few months ago,” Tim grumbled. It would have made murdering the Joker more fun. Not that Tim was enjoying being on the receiving end of it. Looked like he was

going to have to transform after all. Dying at the hands of a two-bit KISS fanboy wasn't on his agenda.

Harm grinned. His chipped tooth looked like a fang. "You weren't even on my list. I was only going to target Young Justice, but killing the Bat's child soldier . . . Now *that's* an unforgettable start to a career."

"You sicko," Tim said, trying to get his movement back.

There was *so* much wrong with what Harm just said. First off, Bruce didn't have child soldiers. He had wonderful, protégé vigilantes that out-stubborned him into letting them stop crime while he hovered anxiously in the background. And what did Harm mean, Tim wasn't part of Young Justice? That made zero sense.

Harm raised his blade, angled to stab Tim in the heart. Tim snarled, letting his teeth grow longer. He could feel movement returning, albeit slowly. He just needed a couple more seconds—

Tim didn't get his seconds.

Luckily, it was because a red blur bodyslammed Harm at the speed of sound and threw him off Tim.

Impulse stopped, lightning running down his uniform as he glared at Harm. Static made his hair extra poofy, but for once that didn't take away from his threatening aura.

He looked *furious*.

"Thanks, Imp," Tim said, struggling to his feet. He nearly fell over again, still dizzy from whatever was coating Harm's sword. "I owe you."

"Anytime, Rob," Bart said, eyes fixed on Harm. "I was going to ask you for more help on the bombs, but this is more important. Let's take this guy out!"

“Yeah,” Tim grinned and got back into a fighting stance.

Harm looked wary now. Fighting heroes was tricky, but fighting a speedster was an entirely difficult level. There was a reason Toyboy had been tasked with keeping Bart busy. With him by Tim’s side, they were practically unstoppable.

Wait.

“Imp, what did you say about the bombs?” Tim asked.

Bart blinked, wide-eyed and innocent. “Oh, just that I forgot which wires were which. I think I might be colorblind, actually. They all look the same. Don’t worry though, I put them all in the same place, so I can defuse them all at—”

Harm, Tim, and Bart all lost their balance as an explosion several blocks away rocked the city. The skyscraper they were on shook like reeds in the wind, and Tim grabbed onto Bart in case they had to make an emergency flight off it.

In the distance, an inferno was spreading from Grant Park, bathing the waterfront in sickly orange light.

The three of them stared at it. Harm in awe, Tim in appreciation (he liked fire) and Bart with mild embarrassment.

“Oops,” Bart said. “I forgot they had timers.”

Harm cackled. “With heroes like you, I’m not even needed. Good luck saving the day now, Young Justice.”

He jumped off the building, his velvet coat flapping in the breeze. Tim moved to follow, then froze.

If they hurried, they could catch up to him, but there was also a *lot* of dust in the air from the explosion, and the fire was spreading to buildings.

Tim sighed. He was a connoisseur of arson. He knew it had to be put out now, otherwise Chicago wouldn't be so much a city, just an ash heap.

Looked like they'd have to put the psycho serial killer teenager on hold until the city was saved.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go help clean up."

Being a champion of justice was so tedious.

***

Half an hour later, Tim and Young Justice stood amid the rubble that was once Chicago's finest park. The worst of the flames had been put out, thanks to Kon using his tactile-telekineses to drop part of the Lake Michigan on them, but smoke still rose from the rubble, and ash hung in the air in an oppressive cloud.

Tim took a deep breath. Finally, it was starting to smell like home.

The only thing left standing in the destroyed park was a lone zeta tube that had been disguised as a telephone booth. They were built to withstand practically everything, so Tim wasn't surprised it survived the fire.

He *was* surprised at how many Justice Leaguers were using it though.

Apparently, Bruce had been called into a JLA emergency meeting. Or he'd called the meeting. Tim wasn't sure; he was fuzzy on the details. Either way, Bruce had been at the Watchtower when the league was alerted about Young Justice's minor city-park-sized arson incident.

He was still there when a news camera caught Young Justice's cleanups efforts, and spotted the corner of Tim's cloak on camera.

Bruce marched out of the zeta tube radiating all kinds of emotions, gauntleted hands curled into spiky fists.

The rest of the league followed him like a trail of ducklings because they were busybodies with no lives.

"I thought you said he wasn't scary, you *liar,*" Kon said, white-faced as Batman stalked toward them.

"He isn't," Tim said, cheerfully. "Hi, B!"

Bruce stopped a few feet away, jaw squared and eyes thinned to the narrowest of slits. He looked like the picture of fury. Everybody was keeping a large distance between themselves and the Bat.

Everybody except Tim, who hopped in front of him and grinned. One of the leaguers muttered a "God save the kid" under their breath. Tim didn't catch who.

"Robin, report," Bruce gritted out.

"We were pursuing a serial killer when one of Superman's rogues got handsy with explosives," Tim said. "It was Toyboy, I didn't see him in person. I was fighting the serial killer and almost got my head chopped off—which was super fun—and missed that part."

Bruce closed his eyes and somehow managed to clench his jaw tighter. "Almost got *what* chopped off?"

Tim gestured at his neck, still grinning. The cut on his neck was finally clotting, but there was a streak of blood on his collar.

“Where are the villains?” Wonder Woman asked as Bruce focused on breathing evenly.

“Uh, we lost them,” Cassie said. “Both of them.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. “You went AWOL from Gotham during a possible hostage situation, destroyed an entire green space, and let a serial killer escape.”

Tim glanced around the destruction around them: shattered windows, crisped trees, fires still being put out. “It sounds worse when you say it like that. In my defense, you left me unsupervised.”

“*No, I did not.”* Bruce said.

Oh yeah, he hadn’t. Whoops.

“It’s my fault, sorry,” Bart said, peeking over Tim’s shoulder. “I saved Robin from getting killed. I won’t do it again.”

Flash appeared by Batman. “No, that was a good thing, Impulse. Definitely do that again.”

Bart looked doubly confused now. Tim could relate. The mixed messages were strong tonight.

Bruce looked over Young Justice, jaw working as he mulled over what to say to them. The teens fidgeted, but Tim wasn’t concerned. Bruce was mad and frustrated, but it was obvious from his body language that it was because he was worried, even though he didn’t *have* to be, since Tim could take care of himself just fine.

“You will all report to your mentors and authority figures,” Bruce said to the others. “They will handle the consequences for how you conducted this mission.”

“Hey, not cool,” Kon protested. “We’re our own team, you can’t tell us what to do.”

“Until you know to use comms to coordinate your objectives, I can,” Bruce snapped. He turned to Tim. “As for you, abandoning your civilian duties without leave is unacceptable. I thought I had to file a missing persons report, Red Hood is still tearing through the Gotham underworld to find you, and Nightwing severely injured several criminals in pursuit of information on your whereabouts.”

“Well, that’s a complete overreaction,” Tim said.

Bruce grit his teeth so loudly that penguins probably heard it in Antarctica. *“Unacceptable.* It’s time you learn there are consequences for your actions.”

“What, you’re going to punish me?” Tim scoffed, unrepentant. "How’s that going to work? I’m immune to all your scare tactics.”

Lectures didn’t work on Tim, he didn’t mind being grounded because it meant free Hoard time, and taking away his humans was a no-go because Tim needed them the way people needed air. Bruce couldn’t do anything, and he knew it.

Besides, Tim was riding a high. He’d used compliments, spent quality time with Young Justice, and protected them from harm and Harm. He got a good grade in socializing and nothing could bring him down after a victory like that.

Tim’s confidence hesitated as Batman smiled. It was not a nice smile, and the laugh that followed was even worse.

Everyone took a step back. Flash even crossed himself. Tim didn’t blame them; Batman didn’t laugh often, and usually it was because his Robin did something cute. *This* laugh was borderline villain and the complete opposite of reassuring.

Tim didn’t step back because it was still his Bruce, but that was a mistake. Bruce put a hand on Tim’s shoulder and squeezed.

“No, I can’t punish you,” Bruce said. “But we *can* have a long, vulnerable talk about our *feelings.”*

Tim felt the blood in his face drop to the soles of his feet. The reassuring hand on his shoulder was suddenly *not* reassuring.

"Nope," he said, but Bruce grabbed his collar and threw him over his shoulder before Tim could run.

"Put me down, B. No! *No,* you can't make me!" Tim screeched. "This is evil!"

He scrambled to escape Bruce's hold, but only managed to scratch his armor with half-formed claws. Distantly, Tim could hear Bart wrestling with the Flash, yelling about how he had to save Tim from his greatest weakness (emotions), but that took a backseat to needing to get away *right now.*

"I am feeling hurt and angry," Bruce said loudly, over Tim's howls. "You disappointed me, Robin."

Batman shouldered past his gaping teammates toward the zeta tube. Tim bit his shoulder pad, but had to stop before accidentally using his venom (controlling it was a work in progress).

"Shut up, I know you're lying!" Tim said desperately. He had to be, because if Bruce was *upset* upset, then Tim was too.

"I am feeling all the negative emotions," Bruce continued, punching in his code.

Tim hissed a death rattle, then turned to his team. "Guys, help!"

Young Justice was still huddled near the center of the wreckage, looking flabbergasted. Didn't they see how bad this was? Bruce was possessed by the devil; he needed to be stopped!

"We are going to spend the night communicating," Bruce said stoically, as if the idea wasn't horrific to him as well. "And you're going to *like it."*

"Nooooo!"

Tim fingers were pried off the zeta's door frame, and hateful white light zoomed them back to the Batcave.

Tim should have killed Harm after all. At least that would have made this horrible, evil punishment worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Tim: I have no fear.
Bruce: I'm going to talk to you about feelings.
Tim: One fear.

For all you guys wondering if Harm will come back . . . How do I put this. He won't.

Hell Comes With Hugs

Chapter Summary

Bruce thought he could scare Tim into behaving with his "feelings" and "worry," but the joke was on him, Tim was ungovernable.

And very, very mad.

Chapter Notes

Hey, sorry for not updating in a hot minute. I'm in my last semester at school and am blitzing a thesis and some intensive second language certifications, so it's been crazy. But my defense is coming up so I should have more time to update soon.

Shoutout to RavenGranger for her amazing beta! Her excitement for this fic is what keep me writing when the horrors persist!

Now, tune it for: Tim holding a grudge, enacting his Evil Terrible Vengeance, and going full cat mode.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mistakes were made. Not by Tim, of course—he was incapable of that—but Bruce was on thin ice.

Bruce was a cruel, evil man. There were punishments, and then there were sadistic nightmare-fuel torture techniques, and Bruce had used the latter. No amount of violence or property damage could justify talking about *feelings.* Tim wanted a chat with the Human Rights committee about that; clearly, they'd missed the memo.

After dragging him home, Bruce had sat Tim down in the Batcave and lined out in excruciating detail the nine levels of worry he'd felt when Tim went MIA. Almost being killed by Harm had made him even *more* scared, even though Tim was *clearly* alive.

Humans. They fretted over the randomest things. If Tim was still alive, then why worry? And if he'd died, they just needed to murder Harm to make it even. It wasn't rocket science.

Unsurprisingly, Bruce no-murder-or-fun-ever Wayne didn't appreciate Tim's wisdom. It took over three hours of high-definition, blow-by-blow emotional torment before Bruce was done torturing him. By the end of the first hour, Tim had transformed into a dragon and refused to move from where he'd curled on the floor. Playing dead was his only defense.

Janet was livid when Tim told her about it. She went on a tirade about child abuse and monstrous evils, and she vowed to return to Gotham to wreak vengeance in Tim's name.

Jack just said Bruce had a point and that Tim should've reassured them he was okay.

So, obviously, Jack was a heartless traitor corrupted by humanity and needed a refresher on dragon *everything.*

Jack also faked another heart attack to stop Janet from coming back to Gotham to "have it out" with Bruce, which meant he was in both her and Tim's bad books again. Worrying his dragons was bad behavior. Jack needed to pay for his crimes, just like Bruce. And Jack was wrong; communicating emotions *was* child abuse. It had to be! Tim wanted justice.

And justice he would get.

Janet would reeducate Jack. She knew exactly how to handle him (over twenty years of marriage gave her a lot of experience), so Tim left her to it. He had bigger fish to fry.

The emotions talk was supposed to drill it into Tim's head that sneaking off was bad. But, if anything, he wanted to do it *more* to spite Bruce. How dare he use Jack's ultimate technique (emoting) to make Tim feel guilty.

It was time to give Bruce a taste of his own medicine.

***

Once upon a time, Tim would have gone about his revenge with childish innocence: YouTube prank compilations, Silly Putty in sandwiches, casually breaking several thousands of dollars' worth of antique vases—normal, harmless things.

That Tim was dead, and Hell had no fury like a Drake forced to emote.

Bruce didn't want Tim going out alone? Fine, he wouldn't.

Tim refused to leave his side. He canceled his plans with Steph and Cass for the weekend and holed up with Bruce in the cave while the man solved cold cases. He chewed on an old Batsuit, ignoring the siren song of detective work in exchange for petty destruction. He wanted to tear the T-Rex down, but he only had one shot at destroying it. He had to get the timing right, or Bruce would stop him and repair the darn thing.

Someday he'd rip it to pieces. Just not yet.

Bruce didn't seem suspicious. Actually, he seemed to like having Tim spend time with him. He positively *oozed* happiness. Quality time with his slew of Robins was his favorite thing.

No matter. Tim had a plan.

The plan was to fight fire with fire, and it was highly effective.

Over the next several days, Tim refused to leave Bruce's side for anything. He called in sick to school, forged a doctor's note, stayed in the same room as Bruce at WE, and draped himself over him in dragon form back at the manor. The only time Tim wasn't physically squishing B was when Cass dragged him to dance class, but even then, Tim would spam him with texts to remind him that Tim wasn't truly gone.

He was a burr. A passive-aggressive, fire-breathing burr with venom.

He didn't just attach himself to Bruce during the day, either. No, that'd be too easy. He had to bring the game to patrol to drive the point home.

“Robin,” Batman said on day four. “Enough is enough.”

“Enough what, B?” Tim said. “I’m just doing what you wanted by not running off.”

Tim was currently riding piggyback, getting in the way of Bruce’s cape and messing up all his grapples. When Tim got bored, he bit Bruce’s cowl and left teeth marks in it. It was *very* distracting, and Tim was pretty sure he’d broken Bruce’s comm.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Bruce said, trying to reach for his grapple. Tim hooked his ankle around Bruce’s utility belt, stopping him. “You worried us.”

“And now you don’t need to worry,” Tim said, carving a frowny face into Bruce’s shoulder pad with a claw. “I don’t even need my tracker since I’m so close by. Isn’t that wonderful? It’s like your dream come true.”

Bruce muttered “Monkey’s paw” under his breath, then tried to head toward the Trout & Sons bank to stop a robbery.

Tim made sure they were alone on the roof, then casually shifted 3/4 of the way into dragon form, adding several hundred pounds to his weight. Bruce went down and got the wind knocked out of him.

“Robin—” he growled, but Tim didn’t listen.

He finished transforming and curled up on Bruce like a cat. Tim was getting pretty big; he didn’t want to break Batman’s ribs. But immobilizing him? Easy.

“Robin Bat-Child the Third, get off me this instant,” Bruce hissed. *“Tim!”*

Tim ignored him and nuzzled Bruce’s face with his snout. Then he went boneless and closed his eyes. Time to take a nap.

***

Napping, it turned out, was the most effective way to trap Bruce. He got mushy and soft because quality time with Robins was precious to him, but also went slowly insane from not being able to move. Tim quickly mastered the art of flopping on him whenever Bruce set his phone out of reach on the counter, so he couldn't even call for help.

Batman was now subjected to endless hours of cuddles. Get wrecked, B.

The others were harder to punish.

Jason got wind of Tim's anaconda impersonation and wouldn't come back to the manor without a truce declared. Cass was impossible to be mad at, so obviously Tim couldn't do anything to her, and Alfred just had this Look, like he was daring for Tim to step a toe out of line and suffer the consequences.

Tim spent his childhood battling Janet for dominance. He had an acute sense of danger and could sense when he was outmatched. He didn't bother Alfred.

As for Dick? Tim didn't even need to do anything to punish Dick.

"It's not fair you get all the cuddles," Dick grumbled at Bruce when the whole family (minus Jason, still refusing to get in Tim's grabbing range) was in the living room one afternoon. "Where's the equality?"

Tim shifted back halfway so he could use his human vocal cords. According to Jason, it made him look like something out of a horror movie, but that wasn't Tim's problem. "Of course I'm not going to punish you with physical affection. You *like* hugs, it's different."

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm traumatized from almost losing my baby brother, did you think of that?" Dick said. He was on the couch, smashing keys on his laptop as he worked on a project. "I need

comfort hugs to heal my soul."

"Then starve," Tim said, getting more comfortable. He was sprawled over Bruce's lap and had zero intention of moving for the rest of the day. Bruce had meetings later, but that wasn't Tim's fault. He'd have to skip them or go remote.

Bruce leaned over to get a look at Dick's computer screen. "Why are you looking at engagement rings?"

"I'm stressed, this is how I cope with stress," Dick said. His eye twitched.

"I . . .see." Bruce hummed, then went back to scratching behind Tim's ears.

Tim purred, turning all the way back to his dragon self. He loved the scratch of fingernails on his scales. It was officially his favorite thing ever, and it made him turn into a boneless lump.

"Are you done tormenting me yet, Tim?" Bruce asked fondly, pausing the scratches.

Tim gave a halfhearted growl and nosed Bruce's hand. His human had one job right now. If he didn't do it properly, Tim was demoting him to second-favorite hoard member.

"Thought not," Bruce sighed, and he went back to rubbing Tim's head, right behind his horns.

Tim decided never to forgive Bruce ever. If grudges got him head scratches, then he'd be getting vengeance for the rest of forever.

Best. Revenge. Ever.

***

“Tim, you need to move,” Bruce said a couple hours later.

Tim cracked his eye open and growled, very much unmoved. They were still on the couch. Dick was gone—he’d left earlier, muttering something about putting a special order in at Ever After Rings Co.— and the sun was setting. The clock said five o’clock, which meant it was time for a pre-dinner nap, not evil consciousness.

“*Tim,”* Bruce said with feeling. “I have a meeting with the Justice League.”

Tim swiped his tail and knocked a photo off the opposite wall, pointedly getting more comfortable.

“Do you want me to apologize? Is that what this is all about?” Bruce demanded. “I’m not sorry for being concerned. I’d do it again. You terrified us. Communication is a two-way street, even if you don’t like it.”

Tim licked the air. Hmm, tasted like sweet satisfaction. His plan was working.

The joke was on Bruce. Even if he’d been sincere, Tim wouldn’t have accepted the apology. He adored Bruce to the ends of time, but this wasn’t about making up. It was about tormenting him, just a little.

Tim *really* didn’t like talking about feelings. This would teach Bruce not to do it again, and by using affection, no less. Truly, Tim was a devious creature. A scourge upon the earth. Jack’s How To Be Human Lessons were coming in clutch, though not in the way his dad intended.

“ . . . Fine,” Bruce muttered. “If this is how you’re going to be, then I’m going to use code Alpha-Four-Indigo.”

Tim paused and tried to remember which one that was. It didn’t *sound* familiar. It better not be one of B’s contingencies for Tim. Those were encrypted so well that he still couldn’t crack them. Babs was the one in charge of them; he just knew it. Silly hoard, thinking they’d ever need to take him down.

Bruce unlocked his phone and cleared his throat. Tim cracked his eye back open to squint at him. Was that a Word Document pulled up?

“February second, Wednesday. Journal entry done under the direction of child therapist Georgia Lionel, written by Bruce Wayne. ‘It’s been three months since Mom and Dad died. I am very sad. I keep waking up forgetting they are gone, and then I—'” Bruce stuttered. “’Then I hear the gunshot, and—'”

Tim threw himself away from Bruce and bolted, not even bothering to turn human-shaped again.

He wasn’t paid enough to listen to Bruce’s eight-year-old diary. Hoard time was great, but he wasn’t a masochist.

***

Of course, a mere journal entry couldn’t deter Tim for long.

“Batman, why is there a dragon in the conference room?” Aquaman asked, stepping over Tim’s coils.

Tim hissed and flared his wings. He was sprawled on the floor by the door, forcing everyone to hop over him to get to their seats. His tail snaked around the room until it wrapped around Bruce’s ankle as a reminder the Dark Knight could never escape.

Bruce sighed as he went through the meeting agenda again. “Robin is experimenting with teenage rebellion. Pay him no mind.”

“No offense, but I very much mind,” Hal Jordan said. “I saw what he did to Beast Boy, and that was without all his claws out.”

“Don’t worry, Robin has standards. He wouldn’t try to eat you,” Bruce said.

“That’s insulting, I’d taste great,” Hal said, then glanced at Tim. “Don’t get any ideas.”

Tim curled his lip, showing off several rows of needle-sharp teeth. A wisp of smoke curled up to the ceiling. Tim didn’t use his fire very often, but he’d be interested in trying some Lantern flambé.

Several League members edged a bit further away. Tim licked the air. Good to know his intimidation factor was still there.

Superman, unfortunately, was immune to Tim’s glare of death. He just patted Tim’s head on his way past him and said he was glad Tim was comfortable enough to transform around them.

Tim hissed at him too. Comfort had nothing to do with this. It was spite, all spite! He’d remember this disrespect. Tim feared nothing (except feelings), and he transformed when he felt like it.

Flash also petted Tim, vibrating with so much excitement that Tim was too bewildered to snap at him. He zapped himself into his chair so fast that he left an afterimage behind. Tim swiped at it, reminded fondly of Impulse.

“Man, Bats, if I’d known it was Bring Your Sidekick to Work Day, I’d have grabbed Bart,” Flash said, putting his feet on the table. “They get along so well. It’s adorable.”

“Hn,” Bruce said. He was on the last page of the agenda.

“Dude,” Hal said to Flash. “They blew up part of a major city together.”

“I know,” Flash said. “Pretty cute, right? I was super worried about Bart when he first came here. Future kids have a hard time acclimating to the past, but it’s worked out great! I wish I had a dragon friend when I was his age.”

The rest of the Justice League eyed him warily. Tim decided Flash was the only one of them to have good taste.

“Regardless of wholesome friendships, that level of destruction was avoidable,” Wonder Woman said. “Young Justice has been ordered to move back to their original base for the time being. They’ll be under supervision until they’ve finished their training videos and team-building exercises. Once they’ve done that, they’ll be allowed back into the field at Red Tornado’s discretion.”

Tim snorted. As far as punishments went, that wasn’t even a slap on the wrist. Red Tornado was so busy fighting lawyers for custody for his adopted daughter that he let Young Justice do whatever they wanted. Apparently, the court of law was bigoted toward robots. Go figure.

Luckily, Tim was exempt from the team-building activities and training videos, since they were all taken from Bruce’s *How To Train a Robin* folder. Sucked for Bart though. He hated instructional videos. They were always too slow for him.

Maybe Tim would have to stage a rescue.

Bruce cleared his throat and started the meeting.

For once, it wasn’t a world-ending crisis. The JLA was going through a couple minor reforms and looking at potential new heroes to join the ranks. Green Lantern also had news from Oa or whatever bosses he supposedly had. Tim knew there were theoretically lots of Lanterns in the galaxy, but he’d never seen any of them. Lame. He bet other galaxies had cooler ones. What would a group of Lanterns even be called? A bonfire? A chandelier? A luminaria? Something to think about.

Tim rolled onto his back, letting his wings splay across the floor like a mosaic of scales. This was taking forever, and Bruce wasn’t even trying to escape the death grip Tim’s tail had on his ankle.

Boooring. He wished this meeting could’ve been an email.

“Robin, stop that,” Bruce said as Tim started scratching the floor. “We’ve been through this. No destroying the space station.”

Tim dug his claws deeper into the metal floor and ignored him. Bruce was the one at fault, making this meeting so long. Tim was coping the only way he knew how—peeling the steel flooring off

like the lid of a Pringles can.

Bruce sighed loudly and looked to the ceiling, perhaps for guidance.

“You, uh, going to do anything about that, Bats?” Green Arrow asked, nodding to Tim’s work of art. “That’s going to cost a fortune to fix.”

“I am aware, given that I’m paying for it,” Bruce said, with much less patience than he gave Tim.

Point for Tim! Even when he was digging a hole in the space station, he was still higher on B’s list than most of the Justice League.

“Does he still understand us when he’s in that shape?” Green Lantern asked, “or is this more of a total transformation kind of deal?”

“He knows what he’s doing,” Bruce growled, then turned to Tim. “If I give you a snack, will you behave?”

Tim narrowed his eyes. He suspected he was being treated like a toddler, but a snack actually sounded great. He hadn’t eaten since he started his Bruce Hug campaign.

He gave a regal nod.

Bruce pulled a live mouse out of his utility belt and threw it at Tim. Tim transformed back into a human-adjacent shape faster than Bart could run into a screen door and jumped into the air. He caught the mouse with his teeth. It squeaked in alarm. Tim giggled as he spat it out, held it by its tail, and batted it with his hand.

The fun lasted for a few minutes before it tried to bite him, so Tim bit it back. Hard. There was another squeak, then a loud crunch.

The JLA watched him with varying levels of horror. Only J'onn and Diana looked unphased. The rest were green.

"What?" Tim asked them. He sucked the rest of the tail in his mouth like it was a spaghetti noodle. "Did you guys want some too?"

"Thank you, Robin, but we already ate," J'onn said. He gave Tim a smile, which Tim didn't return. He didn't waste time with people not in his hoard. Bruce's coworkers were his problem, not Tim's.

For some reason, J'onn chuckled. Tim hoped he wasn't reading Tim's mind. Silly Martian, thinking that would go unpunished.

"Why was that in your pouch, Bats?" Green Arrow asked Bruce. "I know you carry everything, but still, a *mouse?"*

"Granola bars weren't cutting it," Bruce said, deadpan.

Tim nodded, picking bits of fur out of his teeth. The Quaker Oats chocolate chip bars weren't nearly as fun to eat. Hard pass.

"The worst part was that he turned human to eat it," Hal Jordan said. He shot Tim a baleful look. "Would it have killed you to stay a dragon two minutes longer?"

"My dragon shape doesn't have molars. I like to chew on my food," Tim said bluntly. He loved flavor, but texture was where it was at. Most of his food combinations revolved around getting the perfect consistency, and the shape of his teeth was also important. Humans never understood the thought he put into his eating habits. A shame, truly.

"Go back to the Batcave, Robin, we still have another hour left in the meeting," Bruce said.

Tim scowled. "Fat chance, B. You're the one who didn't want me wandering off. Now you get to reap the consequences."

“I’ll be home in an hour,” Bruce said.

“That’s too long. You belong to me, so you don’t get a choice in this,” Tim said.

Aquaman cleared his throat. “Batman belongs to no one, Robin.”

“Yes, he does,” Tim said. “All my hoard is *mine.* And what’s theirs is also mine, that’s how it works.”

Bruce grunted in agreement, which got the people fluent in Batman-ese raising their eyebrows in surprise.

Tim allowed himself to preen. He’d taught his human well.

“If you’re so determined to harass me, then you can stay,” Bruce said, “but damage the Watchtower again and you’ll be doing the repairs yourself.”

Never mind. Bruce was back on his bad list.

Tim huffed and threw himself back onto the ground, reverting back into his dragon shape again. He was *so* not having this. Bruce could take his supposed authority and shove it up his cape. *Tim* was the one calling the shots, not him. The sooner he remembered that, the better.

Bruce spent the rest of the meeting droning on about policy changes and whether Hal had talked to his bosses about assigning an extra Lantern to Earth yet.

Tim lurked in the corner, glaring at B and hissing at everybody else. He was annoyed they were distracting his hoard from what really mattered (AKA Tim). Clearly, the JLA wasn’t nearly as awesome as Nightwing claimed it was.

In a fit of displeasure, Tim smacked his tail against the door and dented the metal. Bruce glared, but Tim was unrepentant.

There was more where that came from if B didn't *hurry up* and finish the meeting. Tim had things to do and places to be. He didn't have time for unimportant things like bureaucracy.

Oh well, at least he got a good snack out of this. That made suffering through this meeting almost worth it.

Chapter End Notes

The JLA, when batman leaves
Flash: Robin is so cute. A baby dragon. Adorable. Where can I get one?
Hal: That is a demon child sent from Hell to torment us.
Green Arrow (haunted): Where did Batman get the rat?
J'onn: This Robin is my favorite.

J'onn (Martian Manhunter) Loves Tim because, as an empath, he can feel the affection (and exasperation) Tim has for his hoard. Because Tim feels emotions at different intensities than humans, it's refreshing. Also, the amount of love Tim has for his hoard is ADORABLE, and only J'onn knows exactly how much this kid adores Batman, even when he's "holding a grudge."

Of course, not everyone has such a positive view of Tim. For all those who are wondering, this is

How Gotham Criminals See him

RIP their sanity.

Welcome To The Hoard

Chapter Summary

Tim's hoard gets a little bigger.

Chapter Notes

Move over Waynes, there's a new favorite hoard member in town!

Thank you to RavenGranger for betaing. You're the best and I love your comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tim, I need you to move,” Bruce said, like he’d been saying for days.

Tim snuggled closer, studiously ignoring him as he stretched his wings. They were holed up in the study, lamps dimmed as a fire crackled in the hearth. Operation Smother with Affection was super effective. Vengeance was best served with hugs.

“Tim, there’s been an Arkham breakout,” Bruce said, nudging Tim’s head. “People could be dying. It’s time to let this temper tantrum end.”

Tim pouted and blew a wisp of smoke into the air. This was *not* a temper tantrum. This was justice for dragon mistreatment!

Besides, Tim didn’t care if people died. Gotham was Tim’s territory, but he let the humans in it do their own thing, just like wardens did with wildlife on hunting reserves. As long as the ecosystem stayed balanced, Tim didn’t care what they got up to.

. . . He probably shouldn't tell Bruce that, though. Humans didn't like being compared to animals. They had huge superiority complexes about that, and Bruce's morals were annoying. He'd probably try to teach Tim about the human agenda again, even though that wasn't how Tim's brain worked. Jack understood, which was why he'd stopped giving Tim and Janet Sanctity of Life lectures years ago. Instead, he got them to kill other things—not humans—and made them promise to be subtle when they were on the hunt.

"Tim, please cooperate with me," Bruce said. "This is serious."

Phooey.

Tim shook himself back into human shape, yawning as he hooked his jaw back together. "Fine, but I want it on the record that I could've kept this up forever."

"Of that, I have no doubt," Bruce said, giving him a final head pat. "I've definitely learned my lesson."

Tim narrowed his eyes. "Don't pander to me, B. I showed mercy this time, but any more feelings in the air and I'll get really mad. Trust me, you *don't* want to see that."

Tim had a long fuse, but when he snapped there was no going back. Last time he was angry, he'd murdered the Joker. If Bruce got mushy about emotions again, Tim would do way more than cuddle him to insanity.

The panic room was a nice spot to lock up misbehaving hoard members, to start.

"Don't worry, no more feelings," Bruce said. "It was punishment for both of us. As long as you tell us where you are in the future, things like this won't be necessary."

That was the stupidest fine print Tim had ever heard. This is why herd animals were annoying: They insisted on staying in close contact. He longed for the true isolation of the mountains. Too bad his hoard was full of sentient beings; he'd never get a moment's peace.

“Whatever,” Tim said. “Let’s go kick some criminals’ teeth in.”

He rolled off the couch and ran down to the cave.

As annoying as it was having his revenge put on hold, trading affection with violence was a sweet deal.

Time for Robin to do what he did best: terrorize unsuspecting humans with extreme prejudice.

***

Babs’ Arkham system was amazing, but all the coding in the world couldn’t stand up against dynamite and an asylum-wide riot. A dozen high-profile rogues were back on the street, along with a score of two-bit villains determined to wreak havoc.

“Once Pandora’s box opens, there’s no closing it,” Babs groused. “We’re never going to sleep again.”

Over the next week, Tim got to fight Calendar Man, Condiment Man, and Kite Man. Even though he hadn’t been allowed to use his dragon form to fight them, it’d been a blast. Tim didn’t *need* his wings for air superiority anyway; he’d trained his human form to be just as lethal as his dragon one.

He was grateful he lived in a city with so much crime. Nonstop vigilantism was the only way he could burn off his energy. If he wasn’t Robin, he’d have left Gotham by now to challenge other dragons to fights. Jack’d better be proud at him for going after cultists and serial killers instead; that was much safer.

However, good exercise or not, the rise in rogue activity spread the Bats pretty thin. Dick applied for a day off work to catch up on sleep, Jason was doing double-time in the Alley, Cass was up to thirty hours without a nap, and Tim was back to snoozing through school. All of them were bleary-eyed and exhausted, and it showed.

It showed *a lot,* as demonstrated by Bruce shambling into the breakfast nook with the grace of a drugged hippo one morning.

“Rough night?” Tim asked. He’d patrolled with Black Bat last night and missed the action Batman had been embroiled in. Last he’d heard, Ivy had been causing problems near Robinson Park, but got away again. She was more slippery than usual; arresting her was going to take forever.

Of course, at least they knew where she was. Others, like Two-Face, Scarecrow, and Mad Hatter, had vanished into thin air.

Bruce grunted more unintelligibly than usual and reached for his newspaper. He tore the front page in half and almost tipped out of his chair.

“Oh dear. I suppose this calls for a stronger beverage than tea,” Alfred said as he finished plating breakfast. He set the bacon and eggs in front of Bruce and left the room, shaking his head.

Tim watched Bruce with fascination. He looked deader than Jason did in his autopsy pictures. If Tim replaced Bruce’s eggs with microwaved marshmallows, the man probably wouldn’t even notice.

“You stayed up working on Ivy’s latest pollen sample, didn’t you?” Dick said as he sat at the table, wearing an acid green bathrobe with frogs embroidered on it. “I told you it was a bad idea. People aren’t meant to go seventy-eight hours without sleep.”

Bruce grumbled something that could theoretically belong to a language, then tried to spread butter on his toast by dipping a fork into his parfait.

Dick rolled his eyes. “Behold, Tim, this is what awaits you if you keep using Bruce as a role model.”

Tim squinted at Bruce. He was so clumsy, scatterbrained, and zombie-like that it was comical. *Interesting.*

Alfred returned and set a mug by Bruce, rolling his eyes when Bruce almost knocked it over when he grabbed it. It smelled like dirt. “Pace yourself, Master Bruce. The mug will hardly grow legs and walk off.”

Bruce tipped the beverage back and drank with abandon.

“Do you think he can hear us?” Tim asked Dick, cocking his head side to side. “If I ask for a Ferrari, will he give me one?”

Dick hummed, contemplative. “You know, maybe . . .”

“I’m tired, not deaf,” Bruce said in a gravelly voice. He set down his mug, which was now only half full.

“He speaks. Miracles do occur,” Alfred said as he retreated back into the kitchen. Bruce glared after him, red-eyed and unsteady.

Tim twitched, itching to haul Bruce back upstairs and bury him in blankets until he was better. Unfortunately, last time he’d tried that, it hadn’t gone over very well. Mostly because Bruce almost suffocated.

“I have an inoculation for the pollen prepared,” Bruce reported, breaking the “no night work at the table” rule. “It was a blend of cuddle pollen and Joker venom. Most likely, some of her plants were exposed to the gas and mutated naturally. Luckily, by mixing—”

Tim wondered what being dosed was like. He’d had freakishly good luck as Robin so far and hadn’t even gotten hit by Ivy’s tinctures. It looked horrible, but he was curious how it would affect his biology.

“What’s with the scheming face, Tim?” Dick asked. “You’ve barely even touched your . . . uh, food.”

Tim took a big bite of his raw shrimp and pineapple omelet so Dick wouldn't suspect where his mind was going. Apparently, Tim was full of "dangerous" and "unethical" ideas, and stealing a strain of dangerous toxins to test his immune system with probably counted as such. He didn't want to add Geneva Convention violations to his list of alleged crimes. He couldn't stand getting another lecture so soon.

"I was just thinking about school. I have a test today," Tim said. "Don't worry, I studied."

As in, he'd picked up the textbook and thrown it into the depths of his closet without a second glance. That counted.

"Oh, nice. I'm glad you're taking initiative. I'll have to mention that to your dad in the group chat. He'll be so happy." Dick said.

"You have a group chat?" Tim was disturbed. What would they even talk about? Ways to torture people more effectively via camping?

"Of course we have a group chat. Jack, Bruce, and I like to keep tabs on each other." Dick said, confirming Tim's suspicions.

Tim grabbed his mug and decided to drink away that knowledge. He wasn't paid enough to fuss over their fretting. At this point, it was a losing battle. He'd let them keep their strange, human rituals, as long as they didn't force any onto him.

A rich, hot taste made him choke. That was *not* orange juice.

"What *is* this?" he demanded through his coughs.

He'd grabbed Bruce's mug on accident. It was some weird dark, earthy drink full of herbs and spices. It coated his tongue and throat. Tim was *not* expecting that texture.

"That's coffee," Bruce said. "You don't have to—"

“*This* is coffee?” Tim said, aghast. “The dirt drink?”

“Yeah, you’ve never had it?” Dick asked.

Tim shook his head. Jack didn’t like coffee, and Janet never bought groceries when there were perfectly good animals to eat outside. This… this tasted completely different than the gross, watery gas station stuff Tim smelled gang members drinking on stakeouts.

This was heavenly. Delicious. Life-changing. It was *miracle* dirt juice.

Tim needed more.

“Woah, champ, slow down—“ Bruce said as Tim chugged the rest of the beverage.

When it was gone, he stared at the empty mug in horror. Gone? *Gone?* Unacceptable.

“Another!” he yelled, and threw the empty mug onto the floor.

Dick swore, but Tim jumped onto the table and ran toward the door.

Seconds later, he shouldered through the door and into the kitchen, eyes fixed on the Keurig.

“My word—” Alfred said.

Tim dove toward the coffee maker and ripped the pot off the burner. Sweet, precious ambrosia, free for the taking—

Dick tackled Tim from behind before he could partake of its deliciousness. “Tim, STOP! That’s boiling hot!”

“Let go of me, Dick, I need it! *I need it!”*

Bruce had to pry the piping hot coffee out of Tim’s claws, insisting he wait until it was cool enough to drink safely.

“Traitor. Demon. Denier of the coffee! I hope you step on a Lego every five minutes for the rest of your miserable, sad, uncaffeinated life!” Tim hissed at him.

He didn’t care if it boiled him alive; he wanted all of it *now!*

Besides, he could breathe fire. Boiling water would be fine. Probably.

***

Bruce said drinking boiling water was bad.

Alfred said too much caffeine was bad.

Dick . . . actually, Dick didn’t say anything. He had a similar love of cereal, he understood.

Still, Tim would not be denied what was his. These foolish humans didn’t understand; coffee was his, *all* of it, and Tim would not rest until he held it in his claws. But since they were “worried” and “concerned” because of his “lack” of self-preservation, he had to get creative. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in school right now?” Jason asked.

“This is more important,” Tim said, pushing a dilapidated shopping cart in front of them. It was 11 a.m., and they were at Gotham Grocer’s. “Secondary education is literally secondary, so I’m boycotting it.”

The gentle buzz of radio music and grocery checkout lines greeted them as they began their search. Jason grabbed a flyer of coupons by the door.

“When I was your age, I was dying to go to school. Kids these days,” Jason grumbled as he flipped through it. “Back in my day, we cared about our education.”

“I thought when you were my age, you were dead,” Tim said. He jumped into the cart so he could survey the supermarket while Jason steered. “Aisle five!”

“I’m perfectly capable of multitasking,” Jason said, pushing the cart forward. “Just wait, Timbo, I’m going to get my GED one of these days, and then you’ll be sorry.”

“You can have my GED,” Tim said. “It’s not like I’m going to use it. I’ll trade it to you for two dollars.”

Whatever was in his future, Tim guaranteed it’d have nothing to do with academics.

“Humanity is wasted on you,” Jason said. “That’s like, less than a bag of Doritos.”

“It’s what my education is worth,” Tim said.

Jason glared at him, unable to reply. He’d ranted about the American education system enough times that Tim knew he had him beat.

They rounded the corner, and Tim gasped. Rows upon rows of coffee greeted him like the sirens of old, and he was helpless to resist their call.

Tim hopped out of the cart and almost slipped on the freshly waxed floor. It was time to reenact Europe's conquest of the American continents and claim all this wonderful treasure for himself.

"Dude, slow down," Jason said as Tim threw himself at the Beans of Perfection. "*Seriously,* I mean it. There's no way we need this much."

"Yes, we do," Tim said, and continued shoving everything off the shelves and into the cart.

Instant, decaf, black, pumpkin spice, it didn't matter. Tim was an equal opportunity consumer. Once the shelves were bare, he ran over to the bulk section and started emptying the grinds into plastic bags.

"Is this a dragon thing?" Jason asked. "Because you're acting like the British when they discovered spices."

"Yes, but unlike them, I'm going to actually use these. I need them for my hoard," Tim said. "I'm taking it all, and you can't stop me."

The more, the better. After all, why buy one can of coffee when he could buy a thousand?

Bruce would understand. He liked the dirt juice too. Maybe he'd help Tim hide it from Alfred? They could partake of the forbidden elixir together.

"Well, as long as Bruce is paying for it, I guess," Jason said, resigned.

After hunting down every coffee bean in the store, it took twenty minutes for the cashier to scan everything. Once all the coffee was in Jason's (stolen) car, Tim did a happy dance. He *loved* adding to his collection. These would look great next to his rocks.

"Satisfied?" Jason asked as he settled into the driver's seat.

"Hardly. We need to go to Target and grab everything there too," Tim said. "I need more."

Jason's eyebrows quirked just like Bruce's. "Tim, you have enough coffee in my vehicle to kill several small animals."

"But not a large, scaly one! Come on, Jason, don't be like Bruce. I *need* it," Tim said, clasping his hands together. There was so much coffee in the city; what kind of dragon would Tim be if he didn't claim it for himself?

"I'm not like Bruce," Jason grumbled, revving the engine. "Fuck him, you can have all the coffee you want."

Tim beamed. Jason had that glint in his eye that promised absolute compliance as long as it made someone else (his dad) suffer. Tim was such a great manipulator.

"This is why you're in the top nine," Tim said.

"After today, it better be the top three," Jason said.

They only headed home once crates of coffee were spilling into the front seats. Bruce's bank account was actually dented after Tim bought the entire stock of a fancy artisan store in the Diamond District. Everything in their inventory would be shipped to the manor in the next few business days, and Tim was ecstatic.

"This is the best day ever," Tim gushed. Time with his hoard, the day off school, and enough coffee to last a dragon's lifetime. What more could he want? Life was perfect.

They drove past a Dunkin' Donuts, and Tim suddenly had his answer.

"Can we stop there too?" Tim asked, face pressed against the glass.

Jason shrugged. "Why the hell not?"

***

The Waynes were *not* impressed when Tim brought home his coffee haul. Apparently, moderation was a thing. Tim disagreed. They lived in a mansion; there was room for truckloads of coffee. And Bruce had lots of money, so who cared if Tim embezzled some of it (and part of the Drake fortune) to buy some sustainable coffee manufacturers for himself? For being vigilantes, the Waynes really weren't big on corporate crime. Shame.

"Why didn't you stop him?" Bruce asked Jason. "He listens to you."

Tim scuttled between them and hid another box of light roast in the floor vent. He was halfway done putting Emergency Coffee in each room, but there was still much to do.

"Yeah, once a blue moon," Jason said, stepping back as Tim used his tail to knock another pile of coffee grounds closer. "This is your circus, not mine. I'm just sticking around to watch the fallout."

Bruce sighed and grabbed Tim by the collar. "No, Tim, not in there. The vents are bad enough."

"I'm just being thorough," Tim said, holding the screwdriver out of reach. A few coffee grounds in the electrical switches was just a precaution in case all the other Emergency Coffee was compromised.

"Food goes in food-safe places. We already have a mice problem," Bruce reminded him.

"Not for much longer," Tim said, and bit Bruce's hand.

Bruce dropped him with a grumble. Tim was a great exterminator. The only reason he hadn't killed all of them yet was because Cass was training a couple to do tricks.

"You're not respecting my hoard, B," Tim said from his pile of coffee containers. "This is cultural discrimination!"

“Tim, I don’t have a problem with this,” Bruce said. “You can hoard whatever you want.”

“That’s not fair. You don’t like *my* collection,” Jason said.

Bruce turned a wry, disapproving look Jason’s way. “You collect guns, severed heads, and morally dubious gang members. They’re a bad influence on you.”

“Says the man who adopted a murder lizard!”

Bruce looked physically pained by that. Tim handed him a bag of coffee grounds to negate his mental agony.

“Thanks, champ,” Bruce said. “Anyway, Tim, I mean it. I don’t mind if you have a few extra closets of coffee. What I’m worried about is—”

There was a loud slam several doors down.

“*Who in the bloody hell rearranged my kitchen!”* Alfred yelled.

Tim, Jason, and Bruce froze.

They were all Gotham natives. They had an acute (if skewed) sense of danger. The Riddler was a solid 4, Ivy a 6, and the Joker a 10.

Alfred was at least a 47 and climbing.

“Run!” Tim yelled. He flung a box of instant coffee into the air as a smoke screen as Alfred stormed into the room.

The three of them scattered.

***

A couple hours later, Tim fell through the zeta tube, barely saving himself before he biffed it and spilled his travel mug. Kon, Cassie, Greta, and Cissie were in the lounge going over blueprints. Tim dashed over and leaned over the back of the couch, grinning madly.

"Oh, yay, you're here again," Kon said. "Why? I thought Gotham was swamped."

"Yeah, doesn't Batman need you?" Cissie said, nodding to the TV. A news report about Gotham's worst crime spike all year was playing, including a highlight reel of graphic images of recent rogue attacks that nobody bothered to blur out.

"B said I'm a danger to myself and others, and if I patrol, I'll cause irreparable harm to nouns," Tim said. He took a swig from his thermos. Mmm, Americano.

"Nouns?" Cassie echoed.

"People, places, things," Tim said. "I think that's pretty unfair though. He makes it sound like I'm doing it by *accident,* but I promise I only break things when I want to— crap, I'm almost out of coffee. Do you have a coffee maker? Do you guys like coffee? I like it. Let me get you some, it's great, you need more of it."

He took another gulp, bouncing on his heels at the sheer amount of energy coursing through him. He felt powerful, alive, unstoppable and almighty. Bruce was totally wrong; Tim could fight *Superman* right now and win. That's why he came here instead of staying in the manor to "detox" like Bruce wanted. Pfft, Tim didn't need to detox, he needed more coffee.

He was also running from Alfred. The man made the fury of Achilles' look tame. Tim was lucky he'd been able to escape the manor when he did; the place was on lockdown now. Sacrificing Bruce to the butler had been a smart move.

If Tim avoided the consequences of his totally justified actions, surely they would go away. If not, then at least he'd delay his punishment for a while—although, really, how could *coffee* ever be a

punishable offense?

"…How many of those have you had today?" Cissie asked as she eyed his thermos.

Tim had to set it down to count on both hands, then shook his head. "What's the human body's liquid limit? Because I'm pretty sure I went higher than that."

Perks of shapeshifting. If he needed more room, he just rearranged his insides a bit. Tim almost never used his human stomach if he could help it.

"Your pupils are dilated and your heart rate is out of control," Kon said, peering at Tim with worry. "I think you OD'd on caffeine."

Tim snorted so hard he almost choked. "You can't overdose on *coffee.* It's the drink of the gods."

"I've met the gods. They don't drink coffee," Cassie said.

"No wonder the world is full of atheists," Tim said, draining his travel mug. Another bolt of energy went straight to his bloodstream. "What are you guys doing? Can I help? Is it a robbery? A heist? I'm *really* good at breaking into places. I can get in anywhere. I can get rid of evidence too. Just say the word, and it'll be done."

The four of them stared at him. Why was the world so slow right now? Was Tim tapping into the speed force? Wait, was *this* how the first Flash got his powers? Barry must have lied; caffeine made *way* more sense than lightning.

"We're investigating some weapon smugglers," Cassie said slowly. *So* slowly. Tim was *definitely* turning into a speedster now. Wow, a speedster dragon vigilante, that was so cool.

"They're moving some new kind of equipment. Red Tornado said we need to practice being more covert after the Harm incident, so we're planning a stakeout," Kon said. "It doubles as a team-building exercise too."

“Cool, cool, I can help with that,” Tim said. Bruce probably had data on them. If he didn’t, then Tim would just text Jack. The Drakes knew a lot of smugglers; it helped when getting artifacts home to Janet’s hoard.

“You don’t have to,” Cissie said as she restrung her bow. “It’s a team thing, and we don’t want you to get in trouble with Batman again. Speaking of which, are you alright? You were really freaked out last time. I’m sorry I didn’t check up on you, my personal life kind of exploded when I got home.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “It’s fine, you don’t need to worry about me. My punishment didn’t even count as child abuse, even though I think it should’ve. Anyway, I want in. This looks fun. I’m good at stakeouts, I do them all the time. And information gathering. They’re Bat specialties. Just let me make some more coffee first, and I’ll contact my people.”

“Your people?” Secret said. She’d floated closer to him throughout the conversation and was now hovering next to his face.

Tim ignored her and darted into the kitchenette. He was so glad he ditched regular patrol for this. Everybody would experience the wonder of coffee, and Alfred wouldn’t be able to confiscate it if Tim hid it here.

The water began to boil. Tim pulled up Bart’s contact on his phone.

“Whaz goin’ on?” Bart yawned into the phone. It was almost midnight in Alabama.

“You need to come here ASAP,” Tim said. “I found a way to make the world get even *faster*.”

“No way.”

“*Yes way.”*

Bart on caffeine would be a sight for the ages. Tim had to witness it. He *had* to.

“Give me thirty seconds,” Bart said.

The water reached a rolling boil. Tim pulled out his emergency coffee grounds from his belt—the ones Alfred had tried to confiscate earlier. Luckily Tim had four decoys, so Alfred didn’t find everything. Bat paranoia triumphed once more!

Impulse fizzled into the visible spectrum in front of Tim. He dodged the swipe of Tim’s claws as Tim instinctively tried to catch his lightning discharge, then threw his arms around Tim in a bone-cracking koala-hug. “What did you find? Is it magic? Science? Extra Speed Force juice?”

“Yes,” Tim said. He held up a steaming mug of his new all-time favorite drink. “Now drink up. We’ve got a stakeout to get to, and you need to be wide awake.”

There was no way Bart could remain stealthy, even without coffee helping him transcend his mortality, but that wasn’t a problem for Tim.

Red Tornado may have wanted Young Justice to be professional and stealthy, but Tim understood what this group was really about.

Rampant, unadulterated chaos.

And Tim was happy to oblige.

Chapter End Notes

Twenty years ago:

Jack: The city is burning. My hands can't stop shaking. Atrocities have been committed. Janet, you're not allowed near any energy stimulants or alcohol ever again.
Janet: But I desire the forbidden snacks.

Jack: No, please. Spare me.
Janet *sigh*: the things I give up for love.

When I shared the chapter with Raven:

Raven: You wanted a caffeine-themed chapter title, but hear me out, what if we gaslight everyone with a hoard-themed one so they think Damian showed up?
Me: You have a sick, twisted mind. I LOVE IT.

Blame her, not me! (Though there is a reason I'm Hyde, not Jekyll) 😂

Support Your Local Idiot

Chapter Summary

This is a droid, Steph, but not the one you are looking for.

Chapter Notes

Ao3's author curse can suck it. I've had a great week! Passed my thesis (no revisions), got into a grad school program, and was invited to speak at a conference. The curse may return with a vengeance, but for now I am living large! Yeaaaaah!

Thank you RavenGranger for the beta. I'm sorry for making you choke on your laughter so many times . . . wait, no I'm not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stakeout was a bust.

An explosive, disastrous bust, all according to Tim's plan. Sure, the bad guys got away, but he now had valuable data on how speedsters reacted to caffeine. Today might not have been a win for heroes, but it was a win for science.

"Is he dead?" Kon asked, voice full of fear.

Tim nudged Bart with his toe. "Nah, of course not. He's not allowed to do that."

Bart didn't move. He was plastered face-first to the ground, unconscious and free from the shackles of lucidity. Giving him five cups of coffee had resulted in the most *amazing* half-hour of insanity Tim had ever witnessed, but now Bart was paying the price.

Tim nudged him again. Nothing.

“This is a letdown,” Tim muttered.

The Beans of Destiny shouldn’t cancel out Bart’s Bartness. What cruel being cursed his speedy lil’ guy with such torment? It was wrong on so many levels. As soon as Tim found out what higher power did this, he was going to melt them with his acid and make a smoothie out of the goop.

“Robin, he did at least eight laps around the planet before he remembered to meet us here,” Cissie said in disbelief. “My hair is still standing on end from all the electric discharge he let off, and he tried to eat one of the guards!”

“I taught him well,” Tim said proudly. It was too bad the guard had been wearing body armor, so Bart had only gnawed on their gauntlets a bit. Maybe Tim should save some of his discarded teeth and make Bart fake fangs to wear? He’d love those . . . although Max probably wouldn’t, and Mad Max had to be avoided at all costs. He was as bad as Alfred and Bruce combined.

“I’ll get him home,” Tim picked up Bart and threw him over his shoulder. He almost fell over, but luckily Bart was also short. He made it work. “Alabama isn’t that far from Gotham.”

“Yes, it is,” Cassie said. “They’re completely different parts of the country.”

“You say potato, I say French fries, we’re still eating our vegetables,” Tim said with a shrug.

The power of flight and teleporters made distance a moot point. Tim could go cross-country superfast, although today he’d be using the zetas. His heart was doing gymnastics, his bones were vibrating, and he was out of coffee. It probably wasn’t safe to fly until he had at least another 16oz, and Tim was all out of backup coffee.

Bummer.

Secret popped her head out from the floor where she'd been decorporealized. "We're going home? Don't we need to gather evidence?"

"I don't think there's much left to salvage," Cassie said, kicking a smoking piece of wood. "Let's face it, guys, we screwed up."

Tim looked around the warehouse they'd staked out, which was smoldering and missing an entire wall. Bart had forgotten stealth existed, so he'd run in, grabbed one of the experimental laser guns the goons were transporting, and started blasting. Tim didn't know who made the gun, but it'd opened a rip in the fabric of the universe and transported half the warehouse . . . somewhere.

And then the gun broke, destroying pretty much all of the other smuggled goods.

"We gonna have to do another stakeout?" Kon yawned. "That blows. Tracking this one down took forever."

Bart lolled his head and started chewing on Tim's hair. Tim considered dropping him into the nearest lake. Saliva in his ear, *gross.*

"We didn't even find the kryptonite they were moving," Cissie said, picking up the last of her arrows. "If they had any, that is. This doesn't look like a Luthor gig, so I have doubts."

There was a general mumble of agreement. For all his evilness and baldness, Luthor was very good at buying up black market kryptonite. It was hard for villains to get a corner on that market, thanks to his monopoly. Bruce was the only one who could compete, but he tended to make over-the-table deals rather than illegal ones.

"If they did manage to get some, we'll know," Tim said. "We just have to sabotage their base of operations. Easy-peasy."

"Right, because we totally know where that is," Kon grumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Tim rearranged his grip on Bart so the guy wasn't eating his hair. "Well yeah, of course we do."

Tim was good at gathering data from partially destroyed crime scenes. A few mystery laser guns changed nothing. He was *not* letting his Kryptonian get hurt by that stuff. Kon was dumb and impulsive, but his need to face every enemy head-on, no backup plans or support, was awesome. If he was a bit more homicidal, then he'd be perfect.

Alas, morals.

"You know where they'll be?" Cissie asked Tim. "When did you figure that out? And *how?"*

Tim blinked. "It's not hard. Some of their crates are still here. I just scanned their bar codes. Their digital thumbprint leads right back to the source."

The "source" being the facility the goods were smuggled out of, which Tim looked up when the fight was wrapping up. It was a big enough hub that he knew there'd be an entire inventory there, not just a few loose guns.

"Not all of us have computers on our wrists to look that stuff up," Wonder Girl said. "But if you figured it out, then that's great! Where is it?"

"Funny story," Tim said, pulling up his database again. He almost fell over as Bart's weight shifted. "Texas. Which shouldn't be a surprise since it's *guns* being smuggled, but I still find it funny."

The boxes had logos from a bunch of cattle ranches near Dallas. Tim suspected they were shell companies, which meant if they wanted to find the source, they had to go to the next shipping exchange and hopefully overhear or kidnap one of the guys in charge.

Bart yawned and snuggled against Tim's shoulder. "Where in Cowboy Land?"

Yes, semiconscious! Impulse was (almost) back in business.

Tim showed his speedster the screen. “Yee-Haw’s Annual Rodeo and State Fair. It starts in a couple of weeks. Looks like they’ve been using events like these to gather and distribute their goods. We’re going to need some epic southwestern disguises for this mission.”

The others stared at the hokey, flannel-wearing mascot on the flyer Tim had found for the event online with a mixture of excitement and dismay.

Tim hoped Dick still had that cowboy hat from Halloween last year. He was going to rock this op.

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“A rodeo?” Steph said. “I’ve never been to a rodeo.”

“Me neither,” Tim said. “It’s going to be awesome.”

It was after school and Tim had some time before he met Cass at the dance studio, so he and Steph were sitting outside a cafe in the Financial District, testing the limits of what Tim could eat. The goal was to get him to find something he didn’t like. The barista got a glint in her eyes when Tim told her that anything (barring toxic chemicals) was on the table.

So far, he’d had a mocktail with raw eggs and vinegar in it, a salad with the ratio of cheese and lettuce reversed, and an everything bagel soaked in orange juice. Tim was enjoying all of them, and the barista was currently in the back brewing potions for him to try. Tim was going to become a regular here.

“You sure you should be leaving Gotham right now? Ivy and the others are still loose,” Steph said. “We need everyone here we can get.”

Tim scooped another handful of cheese out of his salad. “It’s only for a night, and Young Justice needs me. They suck at technology.”

Bruce’s *How To Train a Robin* course meant they all had comms now, but they were still working on the teamwork side of things. Half of the time, Arrowette almost shot her teammates because they tried to fight the goons she was picking off. Very frustrating for her.

Tim had ulterior motives for wanting to skip town though. Alfred was still mad about his kitchen, and his punishments were *nasty.* So far, Tim had managed to appease him by doing furniture repair and housecleaning, but Alfred was one pursed lip away from putting Tim through remedial butler training to teach him how hard taking care of the manor was.

Tim would do *anything* to avoid that. (Butlers weren't allowed to hammer nails into the coffee table, hide coffee in ingenious places, or do anything remotely interesting. Hard pass.)

"You're spending a lot of time with them," Steph said, taking a sip of her normal lemonade. "I'm still getting vertigo from that. You hate people."

"That is false, I am indifferent to normal humans," Tim told her. "They need to be crazy for me to like them. But that's why Young Justice is great! You should totally meet them."

Steph tapped her chin. "Tempting, but I don't know. I have my hands full with you and Cass. Besides, they sound like disasters."

The barista came back and slammed a bowl of mashed-up cream cheese, cookies, and leftover soup in front of him.

"Is this French onion?" Tim asked, trying a spoonful. "Delicious!"

"Dammit, just throw up already!" the strung-out college student said. She stomped back into the cafe, muttering about new combinations to try.

"Thank you!" Tim called after her. He was going to leave her the biggest tip ever.

He dumped some of his cheese salad into the cream cheese soup and stirred it together. Several passerby looked at him like one would a homicidal maniac, then walked away faster.

Tim took a moment to enjoy the sunshine peeking out from the clouds, as well as the sound of traffic and irritated pedestrians shouting by the street corner. It was May, which meant the weather was *finally* getting nice.

"They are disasters," he told Steph. "Oblivious, spandex-clad disasters. That's why I like them, although I wish they'd catch on about some things faster."

"Oh yeah? What things?" Steph said, taking a big bite of her club sandwich.

"Well, you know, about me," Tim said. "I've been giving them tons of hints, but they still haven't figured it out. They're really bad detectives."

They needed access to B's bootcamps—or at least some murder mystery party games. Young Justice excelled at responding to villains tearing up small metropolitan areas, but most crime happened behind the scenes. Punching people was cool, but they were missing out on all the epic white-collar stuff.

Steph set down her sandwich. "Oh, is this about . . . you haven't told them directly?"

"Nah, this is more fun," Tim said, sipping his mocktail. Mm, vinegar. It felt nice on his tongue. "Besides, I'm being super obvious. They *should* know by now."

Tim had actually hissed and bared his teeth at Kon the other day. He'd dropped enough hints about being "a different kind of animal" than the common man, and "evolved for the sole purpose of annihilating his foes" that they should've caught on. Alas, his human act was too strong. Figures this was the one thing Jack had succeeded teaching him.

Steph cleared her throat, looking more serious than Tim felt. "Well, whether or not they've pieced it together, I think it's really brave you're opening up to them, Tim. I know it's not easy."

"I mean, it is?" Tim said. The only reason he wasn't transforming in public was because Jack was so strict about it. His dad would *actually* have a heart-attack if Tim let his true form slip. Dumb paranoia about traffickers, ruining Tim's life.

“I fully support you, you know?” Steph said earnestly. “I’ve done tons of research since we dated. Now I get more of what you were going through—*are* going through—and I think it’s great you’re ready to share that with people.”

“Thanks?” Tim said, a bit confused. There wasn’t a lot of data on dragons, seeing as how anyone who studied them went missing under mysterious circumstances or was found torn to pieces down the line. Had Steph been reading the PDF Jack made?

“If you want, I’ll help drop subtly hints to them too,” Steph said. “And if that doesn’t work, we can always leave pamphlets around their base for light reading. We can educate them unawares.”

“Uh, okay,” Tim said. There were dragon *pamphlets* now? “. . . Does that mean you’ll come to the rodeo with me?”

Steph needed to meet Young Justice. Dick took her with him to visit the Titans sometimes, and Babs *loved* teaming Spoiler and Black Canary up together for the Birds of Prey, but Steph still spent most of her time in Gotham. Tim figured she’d appreciate a chance to get out and experience some good old-fashioned Americana.

Look at him, helping his humans socialize. He was a great owner; they’d get all the socialization their species required under his tender care.

Steph crossed her arms. “I’ll be with you to the end, my dude. I’ll even add ally pins to my Spoiler uniform if it makes you happy.”

Tim now had a sudden and desperate desire for dragon support pins. He thought those were only for humans. This was a game-changing discovery.

“Sweet!” he said. “This is going to be so fun. You guys will get along great. But don’t worry about costumes, I have that covered.”

Making disguises was another one of Tim’s lesser-known skills. He had a few days before the rodeo, which gave him plenty of time to put together a legendary ensemble for his Hoard.

The hard part would be coordinating with Young Justice. They *really* needed to answer their texts.

The barista came back, eye twitching. “Alright, last one or my boss says I’m fired. I hope you choke, you psycho.”

She handed him . . . something. Tim actually couldn’t identify it. It smelled like freezer burn and microwave damage. Tim swore something in it was moving.

“You guys are the best café ever,” Tim said, stabbing the wriggling part with his fork. It made a *schlomp* sound. “Tell your manager I said hi.”

He chewed on whatever it was she’d served him and shrugged. It wasn’t bad, but not great either. It mostly tasted like soggy, defrosted bread and meat.

“Damn you, I had a bet riding on this,” the barista hissed as she retreated.

Tim threw a couple hundreds onto the table as thanks for her service. Another reason Gotham was the best city: the food service workers were almost as crazy as Jason during his Pit-era.

Chapter End Notes

Steph: I’ve connected the dots.
Me: You haven’t connected diddly squat.
Steph: I’ve connected them.

Though, to be fair, she is right in assuming Tim is aroace. Tim just doesn’t realize it because my boi dumb. He’s mastered obliviousness to the point that it is a superpower. Sexuality? That’s a human thing, it doesn’t count for dragons, why should he bother with it?

(Before y’all yell at me in the comments, I’m aroace. I’ve been where Tim is. I find this hysterical and relatable.)

Socializing 101

Chapter Summary

Tim, showing off his empty group chat: Behold, my friends!
Jason: Yeah, about that

Apparently, lack of communication is a more serious snub than Tim thought. Luckily, he has a hoard of humans to help explain things to him.

Chapter Notes

Thank you Ravengranger for betaing this chapter! Almighty Beta, thou are an angel among pigeons. Glory be to thine name.

Shoutout to all my aroace readers too! You're an army of unstoppable awesomeness, and I love you all! 💜🤍🖤💜🤍🖤🐉

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next week was a slog.

Alfred's wrath was something Tim was well acquainted with. Despite being an unflappable butler, there were some surefire ways to get under his skin, such as breaking furniture, committing culinary "sins," and messing with his kitchen.

Tim's hobbies, for better or for worse, overlapped with all of those, so he and Alfred were locked in a battle of wills over the fate of Wayne Manor.

Alfred usually won, but Tim had a few victories under his belt.

This was not one of those wins.

Alfred had ripped him a new one for messing with the spice rack. Apparently, throwing away all the seasonings and replacing them with coffee grinds was a sin punishable by death. Now, Tim was being forced to clean the manor top to bottom, be Alfred's gopher for errands, and write "I will not tamper in God's domain" on a spare blackboard over and over.

Alfred was God. At least, God of the kitchen, and he was a deity without mercy.

Tim collapsed onto a sofa in the library and groaned, fingers aching from another day of polishing silver.

"Someday, I'm going to have my own place, and nobody will get mad at me for wrecking it," he grumbled, although he was lying to himself. He didn't ever want to leave Wayne Manor . . . just remodel it a bit and knock down a few dozen walls. That wasn't a big deal!

His Hoard was the worst.

Tim rolled onto his stomach and decided the only way to recover from these abuses was to melt his brain on the Internet. Reality couldn't hurt him if he turned into a slug.

Two minutes on social media and Tim grimaced, realizing his mistake. His feed was flooded with Dick and Bab's couple photos. Gross, icky pictures of them on dates captioned with song lyrics and puns about true love.

Yuck.

Even worse, they weren't even *good* photos. There were *way* too many filters, and the compositions were crooked. If those numbnuts were going to flood the Internet with their fake love story, the least they could do was respect the craft of photography enough to take good pictures.

"Mom was right," Tim said to himself, "humanity is a lost cause."

There were only a few exceptions to the rule. Sadly, not all of Tim's Hoard made the cut.

He sent a frowny face emoji to Bart to express his despair, then opened up his stalker program. He hadn't seen Young Justice since the stakeout and wanted to see how they were doing.

School, school, autograph signings, school, school, bleh. They were such squares. Greta at least liked to stalk people, but Tim could barely track her down. Her invisibility powers were awesome, but they made keeping tabs on her a nightmare.

Of course, Tim shouldn't complain. There were far more nightmarish things than a teenage girl made of mist. Like Dick's taste in clothes. He made certain rogues look normal.

Speaking of fashion . . .

Tim pulled up his contact list to message Superboy.

Red is really your color. It 's good for hiding bloodstains. You should wear more of it!

Alfred had given Tim a lecture on fabrics yesterday. Remedial butler training was the *worst,* but at least Tim's buddies could benefit from the knowledge.

Superboy didn't reply, even after ten minutes.

Tim pouted, stretching across the couch. Superboy, yeah right. More like Super Dumb Boy. Kids these days sucked at communicating. It was ironic that Bart was the time traveler of their group; everyone else acted like they came from the landline era of phones. How was Tim supposed to coordinate an amazing cowboy-themed costume lineup when nobody talked to him?

"Don't come crying to me when my Chuck Norris regalia brings all the milkshakes to the yard," Tim muttered. "I'll be the envy of all the cowboys, just you wait and see."

They'd be green with envy—the Texans *and* Young Justice.

“What’re you talking about?” Jason said as he walked in the room with a plate of leftovers.

“My friends,” Tim said, shoving his phone into Jason’s face.

Jason leaned over to look at the screen. He frowned as he scrolled through the Young Justice chat. “Your friends leave you on read for months at a time?”

Tim nodded. “They’re bad at communicating, but I’m working on it.”

Slowly but surely, one encouraging text at a time.

Jason shook his head, eyebrows crunching together like fuzzy caterpillars. “I don’t think you and the Mini-Titans are on the same page here, Timbo.”

Tim looked up at him, craning his neck. "What are you talking about?”

Jason took a bite of his food. “I mean, my adorable baby murder lizard, that you ain’t friends.”

Tim’s confusion increased. He was sure his face was as lost as a missing child on a milk carton. “Uh, yes, we are. I unlocked friendship status months ago."

Jason poked his food with a fork and raised an eyebrow. “Right, and Bruce and I just came to an agreement about murder."

The sarcasm was thicker than his Crime Alley accent.

"Tell me this, Timborino, do most friends frequently forget to invite you to their activities? Or leave you out of the group chats?” Jason said. “I'll give you a hint: the answer is no. I admire your persistence reaching out to them, but the definition of insanity has you pegged as crazy."

“They don’t leave me out,” Tim protested.

“Timberlina, they’ve been ghosting you for months,” Jason said, almost gently. “I’ve never even met them and it’s obvious.”

Tim leaned back into the couch cushions, reeling. That couldn't be true, could it?

Jason sighed and patted Tim's head with his free hand. "I know this is probably hard to hear, but you deserve the truth. Find better friends, Timberly."

He grabbed a regency romance from the shelf and walked away, shoveling cold mashed potatoes and string beans into his mouth like a zombie tasting its first brain.

Tim watched him go, speechless.

It had to be a misunderstanding. Jason didn’t know what he was talking about. Tim got along great with the team! They were some of the only humans (and human-adjacent creatures) that he liked, and if *he* thought they were friends, then obviously it went both ways.

He looked back down at his phone. The one-sided chats stared up at him, months of unanswered texts on full display.

. . . Tim and Bart *were* always the last to hear about missions (and that was only because Tim was an amazing hacker), but that was fine. Hero teams were always in flux, and Tim was so busy with his claim on Gotham that he wouldn’t be able to go on all their adventures anyway, so he didn’t take missing a few (dozen) missions personally.

As for the messages, Babs said that Tim texted like an overcaffeinated middle schooler. Tim actually had been kicked off the Wayne’s family chat a few times as a joke, but they’d always let him back in after a couple hours. Young Justice was probably the same, no hard feelings. Dragons were above such petty emotions anyway.

Take that, Jason, there were perfectly rational explanations!

Mostly.

Except that Jason had sounded so *sure.*

Tim ran a hand through his hair, suddenly less confident. The team *had* been ignoring him for a while. Did they . . . did they really not see him as a friend?

That didn't make *sense.* Dick said quality time was the key to good relationships, and Tim was spending *tons* of time with them. He'd even started stalking them! Didn't they understand what a big deal that was?

Tim didn't attach himself to humans easily, so this made him feel . . . something. He rubbed his chest and frowned. That was definitely an Emotion in there. Ew.

"Maybe I'm being too subtle?" he mumbled. He was notoriously bad at verbal communication. It was one of his charm points. Janet said he inherited it from her.

Tim was *proud* of that (the more people compared him to Janet, the happier he was), but humans needed words to understand things, not just hostile grunts and judgmental silence. Not everyone could be as wonderful as Bruce.

There was a small, infinitesimal chance he'd misunderstood his and the team's relationship. If Jason was right, then Tim had to figure out how to fix it.

But how?

Friendship didn't come naturally to him. Dragons, by nature, were solitary. They'd evolved to thrive on their own, and when they were forced to share space, it turned into a bloodbath quickly. Even Janet's clan, close-knit though they were, kept a generous buffer between territories. Their definition of getting along was never to interact at all.

With that in mind, it was a miracle Tim had befriended Steph as easily as he did.

With her, it had been easy, but Tim hadn't starting hoarding her until later, which was odd. Dragons usually knew instantly whether they wanted to add something to their collection, but Tim tended to be slow on the uptake. He hadn't known when he'd started hoarding Batman either.

Tim blamed his human genetics. They always complicated things, as seen by the fact he had friends at all. Dragons weren't supposed to do that! Jack's DNA was corrupting Tim, slowly but surely. How evil.

Still, despite friendship being a human thing, Tim . . . didn't mind it. Steph was cool, and Bart was awesome. Adding more humans to that group had sounded fun, but apparently that was a fool's errand.

To think Tim was experiencing rejection. The horrors would never cease.

Nay, this could not be. He would not allow it. One simply didn't say *no* to a *dragon.*

They were friends because Tim said so. And if they weren't, then they *would* be. Tim just needed to figure out how to change their minds about it.

So, where had he gone wrong?

Tim sighed. For all his detective skills, this mystery was going to be a pain to solve. This was why he ignored his Homo sapien DNA. It came with way too many strings attached. Humanity was *weird.*

He slapped his cheeks to refocus. He'd complain later. If they really weren't friends, then Tim needed to fix things. . . .

Preferably before the rodeo next week.

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After careful consideration, Tim decided to handle this the way he'd handled his ascent to Robin. Namely, with blasé confidence and unmatched persistence.

First, he needed to do as Sun Tzu said and know his enemy.

In this case, the enemy was socializing.

Dragon social stuff was way easier to understand: the more possessive Tim got, the more it meant he cared. It wasn't complicated. There was no need for the strange mind games humans insisted on playing. Alas, Tim was interacting with humans, so he had to decode their strange rituals.

"I appreciate you all very much," Tim said, pulling teeth to get the words out. "You are good humans. If B let me, I'd tie you up in the basement for the rest of your natural lives to keep you safe from this cruel, evil world. How's that?"

The Waynes grimaced. They were squished together on the living room couch to help gage his emotional competence. Bruce was there as a joke, but he was taking it seriously, bless his heart.

"You sound like you want to kidnap them," Jason said, idly sharpening a knife. "That's bad."

"Very bad," Dick echoed.

"But I *do* want to," Tim said. "It's a compliment."

He wouldn't collect something otherwise. Hoards were meant to be hoarded, hence the name.

"Indeed, much like your wanton destruction of my kitchen is a symbol of affection," Alfred said drily.

“It is,” Tim said. “I was improving it!’

Alfred pinned him with a glare that could scare Deathstroke into giving up mercenary work, then left to go do Butler Things, muttering about apples, trees, and hopeless causes.

Looked like Alfred was still mad. Tim thought that was unfair. He was *totally* acing this emotional competency training.

Besides, Alfred had no room to judge. It’d been his job to raise Bruce, and look how *he’d* turned out.

“Maybe you should stick with more commonly used compliments,” Dick suggested. “People like those. Allegories about basements are generally a no-go for humans.”

“What, do you expect Timbers to compare them to a summer’s day?” Jason said, looking up from the knife. “He doesn’t *know* normal cliches, Dickface.”

He turned to Tim. “Tell them about your feelings, my scaly friend. They’ll empathize with you if you do that. Humans are big into empathy.”

Tim flopped into an armchair and blew his hair out of his face. “Jason, that’s literally the dumbest thing ever. Emotions are despicable.”

“Agreed,” Bruce said, “but you can do it if you try. Our talk went well, didn’t it?”

He looked so earnest, even though talking to him about feelings had been worse than when Tim’s teeth were melting.

“I still think you should ditch them,” Jason said. “Or let me and Emotional Support Bazooka give them a *talk.”*

Cass swatted Jason's leg. "No killing."

"I never said I'd kill them," Jason said, jaw clenched. "I just want to *talk."*

Tim threw an M&M at his zombie. "No, this is my Waterloo. I'm going to figure this out. You're not allowed to steal my maybe-friends."

If Jason butted in, Young Justice would totally latch onto him, and that was forbidden. Jason was *Tim's*, he refused to share. (Besides, Jason was, like, super old. He'd cramp the team's style.)

"Maybe you can tap into your human DNA?' Dick suggested. "You've got it somewhere . . . really, *really* deep down. Maybe there are some latent instincts you could awaken."

Tim grimaced. "Ew, no. I'm repressing them for a reason."

Everyone knew Tim liked to ignore that part of his biology; it was blah, meh, and an evolutionary mistake. Not to mention, Tim was *way* more dragon than human. His bipedal flesh suit was held together by magic and a prayer. It didn't define him.

"OK to be two things," Cass said, glancing up from her DS. "Baby lizard and baby person."

"I'm not a baby," Tim reminded her.

Everybody snorted. *Wow.*

Why was he hoarding sentient creatures, again?

"Tim, if you want friends, you need to respect boundaries," Bruce said, like a hypocrite. "That includes verbal ones, such as avoiding implying you will stalk and hoard people. Humans don't like being referred to as prey."

“You *are* prey. Cute, crunchable, helpless prey,” Tim said. Everything was prey to Tim. “Besides, I’m great at respecting boundaries.”

No other dragon was as good at it as he was. Except Janet, but she was perfection itself and therefore did not count.

“You stalked me through Gotham for years,” Bruce said.

“That *was* me showing restraint,” Tim said, waving him off. “I didn’t invade your space, collect your trash to keep, or kidnap you. I took only pictures and didn’t even leave footprints. The National Park Service would be proud.”

Tim’s Hoard pictures were now arranged in a lovely photo wall in the Batcave, complete with lots of thumbtacks and red string. Tim had a civilian version in his room to coo over as well.

“You kidnapped *me,”* Jason said.

“I repatriated you, it’s different,” Tim snapped. Returning Jason to his natural habitat was an act of service that Tim deserved a Nobel Prize for.

“This is going to be a long meeting,” Bruce said, rubbing his temples.

“Only because none of you see things my way,” Tim said, pacing around the room. “We talked about this. Where is the justice? I demand more sympathy.”

It was times like these that Tim missed his mother. Janet wouldn’t insist he inflict on his emotional state on others to make friends. That was borderline torture.

“We’re just confused, Tim,” Dick said. “I’m glad you feel comfortable coming to us for help, but . . . I’ll be honest, you’re actually pretty good at socializing already. You don’t need our help. Even though your methods are unorthodox, they get results.”

Tim blinked in surprise. With all the grief Dick gave him about school, he hadn't expected that response.

"You don't want me to act more human around my peers?" he asked, cocking his head back and forth. "I thought that was your reason for living."

"My reasons for living are getting you to graduate high school and pissing off the commissioner," Dick said, grabbing the snack bowl off the coffee table. "Not micromanaging your social life around people that should be your safe space. As long as your friendships are safe, sane, and consensual, it's none of our business."

Tim looked at the rest of his hoard, who were nodding in agreement . . . Was the family counsel about respecting Tim's dragonness actually paying off? What madness *was this?*

Bruce cleared his throat. "Dick is right. When you aren't trying to eat them, you're good at interacting with heroes."

Tim was touched. Sure, it'd mean more coming from anyone other than Bruce (he'd think a *rock* was good at talking to people), but it was nice to hear.

"But you guys wouldn't shut up about me making friends when I was Robin," Tim said, just to make sure he was understanding this correctly. "What changed?"

"Back then we thought you were an isolated, abused kid and wanted you to build a support network," Dick said. "Obviously, that wasn't the case. The Protege Day was just to get you out of the house, and help me prep for PTA season."

Huh. That explained a lot.

Tim considered calling off the Socialization 101 lessons. Dick was right; he could pass for human super well, and he'd found Bart and Steph just fine. It wasn't like he *couldn't* make friends.

Tim dug his feet into the carpet, disgruntled. Whether he could wasn't the problem. The fact that he'd tried and apparently *failed* was.

Young Justice was the first group of people his age he'd *wanted* to be around. They were silly, strange creatures, but the kind of crazy Tim found amusing.

"I think I need to do this, for science," Tim said, crossing his arms. If they were avoiding him, he needed to find out why.

Even though it'd be easier to lock his probably-friends in the panic room and feed them human-approved snacks for the rest of their mortal lives, he wanted to do this their way. After all the effort he'd put into getting to know them, he wasn't just going to give up. Sunk-cost fallacy was valid.

"Well, okay then," Dick said, surprised. "If you're sure."

"Let's start with the basics," Bruce said.

"Yeah, the basics," Jason said, putting his whetstone away. The knife shone dangerously as he jammed it into the arm of the couch. "First things first, people don't bite each other as a greeting. Second, no kidnapping, even for good causes."

Tim wrinkled his nose. That was a load of bull if he ever heard it. Tim bit Bart all the time! And kidnapping was the best bonding activity ever. It'd worked perfectly when Tim had done it to Jason.

He was already regretting his choice. This was going to suck, wasn't it?

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Tim's compliment practices were about as useful as a gunshot wound to his spleen. His hoard's tips were useless.

“I told you,” Janet said on the weekly family Zoom call, “humans are silly, irrational creatures. There is no reasoning with them.”

“I know,” Tim groaned. “I should have collected stamps instead.”

Jack sipped his blueberry ginger lemonade, watching them with an unjustifiably dry expression. (He always did that when Tim and Janet complained about their high-maintenance, poorly adjusted hoards.)

Once again, Tim reflected that his life would be simpler if he shed his human skin and became a cryptid, but sacrifices must be made for the greater hoard.

“Are you certain that the Waynes won’t let you collect humans in the traditional manner?” Janet asked.

“No, they said kidnapping people and locking them in towers is bad,” Tim said, slumping against his desk. “But if it worked for our ancestors, it’d work for us.”

Trapping people in towers was more of a European dragon thing than a Yinlong one, but Tim understood the urge to lock his precious things away in tall buildings where he could use his air superiority to keep them safe. It was a universal dragon instinct.

Jack set down his lemonade. “Kidnapping rarely leads to happy humans, sweethearts. I know you know this.”

“It worked for Jason,” Tim said. “He comes back for Sunday brunch and everything.”

“And you are hardly one to talk, darling,” Janet said to Jack.

What? Oh, yeah, that.

Tim always forgot that part of Jack and Janet's meet cute. Janet had dragged him back to her cave system to lock away with the rest of her treasures, which Jack always said was "touching" and "sweet," not terrifying like all of Tim's humans insisted being kidnapped was.

Double standards, thy name was humanity.

Jack smiled. "I'm an exception, not the rule, dears. Tim, I'm very proud that you're putting in all the work to meet Young Justice where they're at. I'm sure you'll get the hang of the compliment business soon. You just need to keep practicing."

"If you say so," Tim said. "But it feels like a waste of time."

He texted Beast Boy about how delicious he was at least once a month, but Gar only gave thumbs-ups in reply and stayed on the opposite side of the country. If compliments really were an effective way to lure in friends, they would have worked by now.

"This is stupid. Jason's probably wrong, anyway," Tim grumbled, plonking his head against the desk. "He's, like, old and curmudgeonly. All he does is read books and sell drugs."

Jason was the least qualified person to talk about making friends. He didn't even *have* any. His Red Hood minions didn't count. He paid them to hang out with him. Why had Tim even listened to Jason in the first place? The guy was a nerd with no social life. (His weird, made-up beta reader didn't count. Tim wasn't even convinced that "Carl" was a real person.)

"Well, I wouldn't dismiss him so quickly," Jack said.

"Of course he can," Janet said. "In fact, he should. It's idiocy listening to one's hoard in the first place."

"Jan—"

Tim tuned out Jack's tangent about listening skills. Janet was right, Tim had fallen into one of the classic blunders.

Sure, Jason was a human and (theoretically) better at human things that Tim, but there was one crucial thing Tim had forgotten.

He was a dragon, and therefore better at Jason than everything.

“Thanks, Mom, I needed to hear that,” Tim said. “You’re the best.”

“Of course I am,” she sniffed, and ended the call.

The last image on the screen was Jack’s longsuffering face as Janet preened. Tim captured a screenshot of it to print out for his photo wall. Mom and Dad’s section needed new material.

Once the photo was saved, Tim pulled up another contact.

He’d messed up, thinking Jason was a reliable source of information. He didn’t even *know* the team. Tim had jumped to conclusions based on incomplete data. No wonder Janet was rolling her eyes.

Before confirming anything, Tim needed somebody on the ground floor to lay out the facts with calm objectivity and logic. Luckily, he knew someone who fit that criteria.

The phone rang once before it was answered. Tim leaned back in his chair, almost tipping out of it. “Hey, Bart, how’s it hanging?”

“Hi, Tim!” his speedster said. “Nothing’s hanging—wait, is that slang? Crash. Hey, guess what, I told Max about the rodeo, and he took me to Argentina to buy stuff to wear. My poncho is made of alpaca, it’s so soft!”

“Nice,” Tim said. “My disguise is ready, and I’m almost done bedazzling Spoiler’s stuff.”

“This op is going to be so crash,” Bart said. Tim could almost *hear* the speedster vibrating. “I’m so excited. They don’t have rodeos in the future.”

They didn’t have hardly anything in the future. Tim was starting to suspect that the dystopian hellscape Bart had escaped was what the world would look like if high school leaked into every aspect of life.

“Yeah, about the op,” Tim said, “Bart . . . we’re friends with Kon and Cassie and everyone, right?”

There was a pause. Bart switched to video call, blinking owlishly at the screen. “Huh?”

“Jason’s been telling me stuff,” Tim said, taping his fingers against his desk. His nails sharpened, cutting half-moons into the wood. “He doesn’t think Young Justice likes me.”

Tim was choosing to ignore Jason, but he understood the need for a second opinion. One that had actual friends and experience socializing.

Bart rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I never thought I’d say this, but Jason is right.”

Tim almost dropped the phone. “He is?”

Bart nodded. “Yeah, we’re not friends with them . . . we’re *best* friends. What’s that old person saying. . .'Hoes who bro together grow together?’”

“Close enough,” Tim said with a shrug.

“I’m getting good at old-people slang,” Bart said proudly. “Us and Young Justice are totally grooving. We’re the crashest unit to ever crash.”

Tim released a long sigh of relief. “You have no idea how happy that makes me to hear that. I’ve been freaking out for days. I even got advice from my hoard!”

“Wooooooah.”

Bart sounded suitably impressed, as he should.

“It was my bad though. They didn’t know what they were talking about,” Tim said. “Jason didn’t even want me to kidnap people, can you believe it?”

“But kidnapping is for besties!’ Bart pouted. “I love it when you kidnap me. Speaking of which . . .”

“Do you want me to steal you from Human Child Jail again?” Tim asked.

“Yes,” Bart said, scowling. “I hate writing essays, and Max is making me learn *cursive.”*

Tim winced. Max was evil.

Bart sighed like the female lead to a black-and-white 1950s romance. “I don’t want to do school, I want to punch bad guys and eat kiwis. Life was simpler in the future . . . or, it will be. Tenses are weird.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to endure this for long,” Tim said, glancing at his calendar. “Meet you in Texas on Friday?”

Yee-Haw’s rodeo would be the perfect escape from high school. Tim had already (begrudgingly, unwilling, with much irritation) told Bruce he’d be teaming up with Young Justice for it. Bruce had been so glad Tim communicated with him that he’d said yes without hesitation. Weirdo.

Bart grinned, starting to vibrate again. The phone glitched trying to keep him on camera. “Yes! I can’t wait to hang out again. This is going to be so fun. I’m going to eat cottoncandyandhotdogsandturkeylegsand—”

“Thanks, Bart,” Tim said, “I knew I could count on you.”

Tim hung up and sighed in relief. Bart was so good at untangling human stuff. Sure, he was also a bit out of his depth given the time-travel stuff, but Tim trusted him not to steer him astray.

Also, he actually *knew* the team, so Tim trusted his judgment more than Jason’s. What had he been thinking, taking Zombie-gun-lord seriously? Clearly, the sleep deprivation had rotted Tim’s brain cells. The only friends Jason had were the mysterious, fictional broody boys in those regency romances he liked.

Tim shook his head. He was a *little* miffed that he’d wasted so much time stressing over social customs, but all’s well that ends well. This has just been a false alarm.

“I’ll just be nicer next time I see them,” Tim said to himself. “Just in case.”

A few extra compliments went a long way to making humans happy. It wouldn’t hurt to butter them up more.

Now, time to Google the rodeo address and figure out which zeta tube to take to Texas.

Friday couldn’t come fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

Gar: Oh joy, another text about how I'd taste raw versus flambéed.
Dick: Oh my gosh, Tim's at it again? I'm so sorry, Gar, I'll talk to him.
Gar: Nah, it's fine. It's weirdly endearing.
Dick: ...No, no it isn't. Gar, he's serious.
Gar: Pssh, I know, I'm not going to let him. But whenever I'm feeling down, it's nice to know that there's someone out there who wants me.
Dick: To eat you, Gar. He wants to eat you.
Gar: Meh, I'll take what I can get.

Can I Get A Yee From My Haws?

Chapter Summary

Giddy up partner, it's time to hogtie those varmints!

Chapter Notes

Lesson of the week; Covering your hands with glue before eating finger food is a bad idea. Dinner was . . . interesting.

Also, blood tastes gross. :P

Thank you for the beta, Raven! You're awesome!! 💜

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim and Steph stepped out of the Dallas zeta tube and took the city bus to the rodeo. The air was beginning to heat like the inside of an oven, humid and sweltering. Tim wiped his forehead, wishing that either the bus had better AC or that he could fly to the rodeo.

It was too bad that a dragon dive-bombing a public event would cause too much attention.

Soon, the city center's skyscrapers gave way to business centers and apartments, all built in the same ugly, modernist style that infected post-WWII America with its bland concrete and glass combo.

Tim felt himself die a little at the sight. Would it kill them to put some gargoyles on their buildings? They could give them cowboy hats; it'd look great.

Things got better after leaving the city proper. Yee-Haw's was held outside the city limits, and the gross corporate evilness gave way to rustic charm and cattle ranches.

“Now this is more like it,” Tim said when he and Steph got off the bus.

Yee-Haw’s State Fair and Rodeo’s main gate stood before them, a beacon of Southwestern Americana. Country music blasted from speakers further in, the smell of fried food was so thick it was borderline nauseating, and thousands of people crowded the stalls.

“I knew the stereotypes wouldn’t lie to me,” Steph said, jumping in excitement. “The two-hour bus ride was *so* worth it.”

“This is amazing,” Tim agreed, taking Steph’s hand. “Come on, let’s go find Bart.”

They waited in line, paid for entry, and used all their detective skills to track down the speedster loose on the fairgrounds.

They found him by the pony rides, attempting to speak to the animals in bad Spanish.

Tim slammed into him with a surprise hug. Bart bit his arm, which was the best way to greet a friend in Tim’s opinion.

“I can definitely see why you guys are friends,” Steph said. “Nice to meet you, Imp.”

“Hi! You must be Tim’s purple friend,” Bart said. “Crash. Do you speak Spanish? I think the horsies understand it.”

Steph blinked, then shrugged and leaned against the fence to talk to the animals. The employee manning the booth sighed and ignored them. Obviously, this wasn’t his first rodeo.

Tim left Bart and Steph to it, scanning the fair anew.

Yee-Haw’s was what Tim expected: loud, festive, and full of muscular bull riders willing to risk lifelong paralysis for thrills. The smell of fried food wafted over everything, and Tim licked the air to scent it better: oil, fry dough, and powdered sugar. Delicious.

“I guess they haven’t learned to talk yet. Lame,” Bart said, looking away from the ponies. “At least my costume is cool. How do I look, partner?”

Bart spread his arms, showing off his red and white gaucho poncho, complete with a matching cowboy hat and a toothpick in his mouth. His moon boots had been replaced with cowboy boots, and his goggles with a bandanna tied around his neck.

“Nightwing would be proud of your fashion choices,” Tim said. “You fit right in.”

“We all do!” Bart said gleefully. “I dig your look.”

Tim wasn’t ashamed to admit he preened. “Thanks. I worked hard on it.”

He was dressed in brown leather with his Robin uniform underneath. It was hot—insanely hot—but Tim coped by sticking a bunch of cool-packs to himself. Dick’s cowboy hat was perched on his head in all its white and blue glory, rhinestones on the trim. Tim thought it was cheesy, but passerby kept nodding in appreciation, flaunting their own unholy amounts of leather fringe and bedazzled clothes. Dick would love it here.

“Yeah, you outdid yourself on both our getups,” Steph said, leaning on Tim’s arm. She was wearing an all-purple cowgirl ensemble, complete with a modified Spoiler-belt with all her usual tools.

Steph also added five or six pins to her suit, saying they were to support Tim. Tim was super happy, but a bit confused. None of them had dragons on them.

“I want to be a cowboy forever,” Bart said. “These clothes are hip.”

“Wrong decade,” Tim said. “It’s ‘fit’ these days, or something.”

He’d have to double-check. Slang was a fickle, changeable thing.

Bart blew a raspberry. “Whatever. It’ll all be crash in a thousand years anyway. The important thing is that I’m never taking this off.”

He waved his arm to make his poncho flap in the wind.

“Same. I’m so wearing this to prom,” Steph said. “Anyway, what’s first, rodeo food or the mission?”

“Everyone else should already be here, so let’s get snacks,” Tim said. “It’ll help us blend in. While we look for them.”

“Yeah, recon is great!” Bart said. He zoomed away and reappeared a moment later with a 32oz cup of lemonade and a slice of deep-fried pie. “We should do more missions like this.”

“Yeah. Next time we’ll invite Cass,” Steph said.

“I *did,* but she didn’t want to skip ballet,” Tim said. Apparently, Cass’s best not-Tim friend was in that class, and hanging out with her was more important than helping Young Justice stop smugglers from selling weapons able to kill Superman.

Tim wasn’t jealous.

Ok, he *was,* but as a dragon he had the right to be.

The next time he saw Charlotte or whatever her name was, Tim was going to hiss at her. How dare she take Cass from him. She was *his* human!

“Pfft, jealousy is a hilarious look on you,” Steph said. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re way too clingy with people?”

“Only my favorites,” Tim said. “It’s genetic.”

His hoard was lucky he even left them have lives outside of him. Even Janet didn't give Jack that much autonomy.

"Right, right, whatever." Steph said. "Buy me some deep-fried butter, Boy Wonder. I'm starved, *and* it'll help you cope with a Cass-less existence."

Deep-fried what now?

Tim glanced at one of the stall's menus and froze. So many combinations of so many wonderful things, written up there with no judgment. Pie was the least weird thing on it. Every food known to man was up for the frying.

"I think I'm in heaven," he said. "Somebody pinch me."

Steph and Bart both did.

Tim rubbed his arm, grinning madly. Not a dream, excellent.

He couldn't wait to tell Janet about this place; State fairs had the same taste in food as both of them!

***

After raiding several food booths, Tim, Bart, and Steph split up to do recon and find the rest of Young Justice. Tim quickly regretted not inviting Jason or Dick; they were tall and could've actually *seen* over the crowd. Tim had to make due with elbowing people and climbing on rain barrels to look for his friends.

Pros of being short, he could fit through most vents and was still considered a carry-on item at the airport. But the cons were seriously annoying. He wished he was allowed to transform in public.

Life would be so much simpler, but Tim doubted the criminals would stick around if a dragon randomly appeared. Plus, all the cowboys would probably try to hogtie him.

He found Young Justice near the warm-up circle where horses got ready for their performances. Cassie, Kon, Cissie, Anita, and someone Tim didn't recognize were dressed in civvies instead of cowboy clothes, which was a waste of an opportunity in Tim's opinion. (Kon had a cowboy hat on at least, so he got points.)

Tim grabbed his phone and called Steph and Bart. He held the phone to his face like a walkie talky. "Targets spotted. Squad, assemble!"

"Roger tha—"

Steph was cut off by a blur of static. Two seconds later, she appeared in front of him, held up princess-style by Bart.

"—at," Steph finished, blinking. "What the hell."

"I'm a taxi," Bart said, setting her down. "Beep beep!"

Tim dragged them over to the others, careful to go slow so Steph could get her balance back. Being surprise-yanked through space-time by a speedster was hard on the inner ear.

"Hey guys!" Tim said to Young Justice. "Long time, no see. Oh, hi, Greta."

Cissie held up a glass bottle. Greta peeked out of the neck like a mini Alice in Wonderland and waved excitedly at Tim. "Hi, Robin! I missed you."

"Same," Tim said, then tugged Steph the rest of the way forward. "Guys, check it out. This is Spoy Spoy, she's also from Gotham."

"You can call me Spoiler," Steph said, tipping her hat. "Only Robin has unlocked Spoy status."

“You can call *me* Impulse,” Bart told everybody, making finger guns. “The fastest draw in town.”

He blew on the tips of his fingers as if they were a smoking gun barrel, then whistled part of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* theme song.

“Bart, we know who you are,” Cassie said, looking amused.

“Then you’ll know this town ain’t big enough for the eight of us—”

Greta snaked out of the bottle and returned back to normal size. Her skin was translucent, like morning mist, and she stared suspiciously at Steph. “Gotham? So, you work with Robin?”

“More than that, he’s my ex,” Steph said, punching Tim’s shoulder. “We did the whole friends to lovers to enemies to friends shtick before I realized he’ll forever be the ace up my sleeve.”

“We did?” Tim said, rubbing his arm. Ow. “Wait, enemies?”

“Yeah, before we made up, remember?” Steph said. “My grudges are to be feared.”

That was true. Tim’s suit had had syrup on it for days.

“*Oh,”* Greta said, features obscuring with a thicker, more ominous mist. “You used to date, I see. That’s . . . fun.”

Steph narrowed her eyes. “Yeah, well, that was before I realized how important Robin is to me. We’re ride or die now. I keep him safe from people that’d try to take advantage of him. He’s bad at setting boundaries, you know.”

“I bet,” Greta said sweetly, “since he’s still hanging out with his ex.”

Cassie, Kon, Anita, and Cissie all winced. Kon muttered something about wishing he had popcorn.

Tim and Bart just looked at each other, confused.

“Soooo, spot anything suspicious yet?” Tim asked, once it was clear Greta and Steph were just going to keep glaring at each other.

“Nah, just normal folks,” Kon said, swatting at the ice-cold mist Greta was producing like a fog machine. “Are you sure this is where the drop is happening?”

“Yup,” Tim said. The crowds and large vehicles transporting animals made it the perfect place to do illegal deals. He also figured that one of the smugglers liked rodeos. “All the illegal things are happening here. We just gotta find the right group of ne’er-do-wells.”

“I think I found some on the other side of the fair,” Bart said. “I can be back in a jiff.”

“Do you even know what you’re looking for?” Anita asked.

Bart blinked. “No, not really. But that’s why we have Bats and Purple People. Come on, Spoy!””

Before anyone could stop him, Bart tackled Steph around the waist and vanished into static.

Tim put his arm up belatedly, as if he could grab Bart and haul him back. They needed to do a grid pattern and suss out the area, not randomly chase down various criminals across the fairgrounds.

Typical speedster, always jumping the gun.

“Should we call him back?” Cassie asked as the electric discharge faded.

Tim debated it. “Nah, Spoiler will keep him on track. We’ll reconvene later.”

Unlike these humans, Steph was good at conducting subtle investigations. She usually chose not to because she was dramatic, but she *could.* Once she was done yelling at Bart for kidnapping her, she’d get to work.

Greta “hmphed!” and retreated back into her bottle, looking smug at Tim’s words, which was just . . . okay? What was that about?

Whatever.

“The smugglers will need to store their stuff out of the way, but in a place with decent foot traffic so it’s not suspicious for folks to wander in,” Tim said, turning back to everyone. “For that reason, it’s best if we—”

He blinked, spotting the new person again. “Oh, sorry, guys. I introduced Spoy, but I didn’t give you guys a turn. Who’s this?”

Tim nodded toward the stranger. They were on their phone, tuning out the conversation.

“Oh, sorry,” Anita said. “Remember how we got de-aged that one time, and later went to space to give medical relief for an intergalactic war effort?”

“No,” Tim said. He hadn’t been invited on those missions.

“Oh, well, this is Slobo. We met him in Space,” Anita said, dragging the unfamiliar teen over by the ear. “He used to be a mini Lobo. Kind of like a clone? Or an amoeba that got split in half. It’s weird, but now he’s doing his own thing.”

“It ain’t weird, it’s fraggin’ awesome,” Slobo said, swatting her hand away. “I’m here to wreck stuff and destroy.”

Slobo was even shorter than Tim and skinnier than Bart. He had a pale *Plants vs. Zombies* skin tone, pupilless yellow eyes, and spiky hair that would make Goku proud. Tim wanted to hiss and bare his teeth. He smelled like *competition.*

"No destroying," Anita told Slobo. "This is a stealth mission, hence the disguises. Behave, and I'll go on that date you were talking about."

"You said you'd go anyway, babe," Slobo said. Nay, *pouted.*

Anita shrugged. "Yeah, but I'd appreciate it if *one* of our missions didn't end in explosions."

Slobo scoffed, and Tim wanted to laugh. Anita had such dreams.

Cissie wiped a piece of dirt off her outfit and hissed at Greta to stay in her bottle. Mist-girls caught attention, so she had to be sneaky.

Slobo turned his eyes to Tim and frowned, nostrils flaring. "What the frag are you? You wanna fight? I'll rip you in half."

Tim smiled as he let his fingertips sharpen into claws. "Don't threaten me with a good time."

Slobo bared his teeth. "You don't scare me, freak. Come at me like a man-adjacent thing. I'll bury you face-first in gravel."

Oh, it was *on.*

"Enough, I mean it," Anita said, stepping between them. "Slobo, no fighting Robin. He's not even on the team, so you can't say it's bonding."

Tim was about to say something snarky when he caught what she'd said. "What do you mean I'm not on the team? I've been around since your guys's first meeting."

There was a moment of awkward shuffling. Cissie fiddled with her braid. “Well, you’ve always been more like a guest hero, right? Since you’ve got that full-time Gotham gig, adding another hero commitment would be too much.”

“No,” Tim said slowly. “I’m in all your group chats, just like Impulse. Do you really think I’d be chasing you guys down all the time if I didn’t consider myself one of you?”

Kon took off his cowboy hand and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, yeah? You’re like that weird cousin that shows up at Thanksgiving even though nobody invited you.”

Cassie elbowed him. Hard. “Kon!”

“What? It’s true!” the Kryptonian said, sounding confused. “He isn’t even in our chats!”

Tim couldn't believe this. Jason was *right?* What kind of lame alternate universe was this?

"Yes, I am!” Tim said. “I've been doing my best to be nice. I message you almost every day.”

Texting, regular meetups, socialization. Was he missing something?

“What? No, you don’t,” Kon said, rubbing his ribs. “The only one who texts me that often is that creepy stalker . . . wait, *that was you?!?*”

“Duh, but that’s not important,” Tim said, looking at all of them for a reassuring face. There wasn’t one, just confusion, bewilderment, and awkwardness. "You guys really don't think we're friends?"

His voice cracked on the last word.

"Robin, that's not—we *are* friends," Cassie said. “We just didn’t know you wanted to be a *teammate* teammate. You seem really overworked, we didn’t want to put more on your plate.”

"Seriously? Is that why you always keep me out of the loop? You didn't even tell me about this mission until I showed up at the base with coffee, even though I'm amazing at undercover work," Tim pointed out. Hello, his human act, anyone? “I’ve bent over backwards to help you out, and this is the thanks I get?”

Cassie cringed. "Ok, we haven't been good friends, but I promise we don't hate you."

"You're just a lot," Kon said hypocritically.

Tim crossed his arms. "So? You're a clone made of Superman's insides, and Wonder Girl literally annoyed Zeus into giving her superpowers. I don’t even *know* how Secret got the way she is, but she’s made of mist. We're *all* a lot."

The faces they were making said they hadn't considered that before. Oh, how Tim mourned the loss of intelligent life.

Greta floated out of her bottle, staying translucent to avoid attention. “I’m sorry, Robin, I’m not good with people, and I don’t have a cell phone. I didn’t mean to ghost you. I think you’re cool.”

Her cheeks flushed, slightly more solid than the rest of her.

“You *are* a ghost, Secret,” Slobo said. “You smell like a graveyard.”

“Shut up, Slobo,” the rest of the team said.

“Seriously, Rob, we didn’t mean to hurt you,” Cissie began. “I think there’s just been some miscommunication.”

“No kidding,” Kon muttered, pulling out his cell phone with a look of betrayal. “Haven’t you ever heard of caller ID?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of replying?” Tim snapped back. He fixed his gloves. "Whatever. We don’t have to be friends. I thought that’s just what people *liked* to be when they cared about each other. Let's just finish this stupid mission and go home."

He'd complain to Janet about the intricacies of human relationships later. Just when he thought he had them figured out, crap like this happened.

"Wait, Robin, we didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Let's talk," Cassie said, reaching for his shoulder.

“Oh, *now* you want to talk?” Tim said, slapping her hand away. “I’ve been trying to hang out with you guys for months and only got radio silence. Hood *told* me I was going to get hurt, but I didn’t believe him. Shows what I know about making friends.”

Tim had been reading the signs all wrong. Dumb humans and their strange, backwards ways. All it took Tim to like someone was a brick to the face, but for them it required a socialization more complicated than the Dance of the Seven Veils.

Tim didn’t know why he even tried.

“Hey, Spoy?” he said into his comm, turning his back to the team. “I’m done socializing for the next century. Meet you by the games.”

He walked away from Young Justice, head held high.

***

“They *what?*”

Tim looked up from his corndog. Spoiler looked ready to throw hers into someone’s eye.

“I told you, they said I’m ‘too much’ and not a real teammate,” Tim said. “Operation Friendship was a failure.”

Tim would have to go back to stalking them from afar, maybe even invest in subdermal trackers. Otherwise he *would* kidnap them and lock them in the attic. Cass could help keep them contained. They’d get along with her pet rats.

“I’ll survive,” Tim said. “Somehow. Maybe.”

He’d just ooze repressed misery for a few years, is all.

“I can’t believe this,” Steph hissed. She took a chomp of her street food with draconic aggression. She and Tim were alone—Bart had vanished before Tim had tracked Steph down, chasing down more “leads” that were just thinly veiled excuses to visit the petting zoo and bull riding station.

“*This* is why I refused to join their team,” Steph continued. “They’re a bunch of self-centered jerks. You’ve been nothing but your best self. You haven’t even eaten frosting and sauerkraut in front of them yet!”

“My sacrifices have been great,” Tim said. He dipped his corndog in his lemonade again. Steph wouldn’t let him eat certain things in front of her, but he was glad she understood that it took effort for him to hold himself back.

“I’m going to tell Jason,” Steph said. “He’ll go Rambo on them.”

“Who’s Rambo?” Tim asked.

“Sylvester Stallone, no shirt.” Steph said. “Big guns. Bandanna. Very hot.”

That answered nothing and yet told Tim everything. He finished his corndog and shrugged. Steph was petty, whatever revenge she was planning was probably pretty good.

Steph looked at him and sighed. “Sorry, Tim. I’ve been venting over here, but you’re probably super upset. Anything I can do to help?”

“I’m fine,” Tim shrugged. Frustrated and annoyed, and his heart felt weirdly sore (there were *emotions* in there and Tim refused to look at them), but it wasn’t like he needed to be friends with his hoard. It was just . . . it would have been nice. A socialized hoard was a happy hoard, and . . . oh, that was why he was feeling things. He was treating them like hoard. Great. Time to nip *that* in the bud, if he even could.

Steph shook her head. “You’re not fine. You’re moping, and that’s the last thing I want to see. Come on, they can finish the mission themselves. We can go play carnival games and win prizes.”

She dragged Tim to his feet and shoved him through the crowd. Tim adjusted his cowboy hat before someone taller than him accidentally knocked it off.

“We shouldn’t blow off the mission,” Tim said. “It’s important.”

“*You’re* important. They shouldn’t have blown *you* off,” Steph said. “Now win me a rubber duck before I bash one of their brains in.”

She patted her belt, which had a special pouch containing a brick.

Tim smiled. Classic Spoiler, she never changed.

***

Tim got seventeen texts from Bart. Fifteen were so typo-ridden he couldn’t read them, but the last two said that Young Justice wanted to make things up with Tim, and also Bart had found a suspicious delivery near the stadium full of weaponry.

“I guess the smugglers are using the stables as caches,” Tim said, showing Steph the texts. She blinked at the lingo and spelling shortcuts Bart used. Tim could relate; they were more confusing than the Zodiac Killer’s ciphers. “We should go check it out.”

“Or, hear me out,” she said. “We go home and let them handle it.”

Tim considered it for half a second. “Nah, Red Tornado said whoever’s doing this is smuggling kryptonite. I don’t want Kon getting hurt.”

“He’s a jerk,” Steph said with venom. “He deserves a punch he can actually feel.”

“I’ll make you a kryptonite brick later,” Tim said fondly, “but come on, we’re going.”

Steph kicked an empty soda can but followed, muttering about how Tim was too forgiving.

The rodeo arena was like if a football stadium had a love child with a spaghetti Western romance. People in flannel, cowboy boots, leather hats, and giant belt buckles tromped through its dusty gates and sat on metal benches, munching on funnel cakes and turkey legs. Tim heard more beer cans being popped open than gunshots in Gotham at night, which was a number he hadn’t thought could be topped.

“This is crash-tastic! We blend right in,” Bart said, buzzing into focus next to Tim and Steph. “Good disguises, Rob!”

Tim gave a double thumbs-up. They were killing the clothing game, although Bart’s gaucho poncho was so big it went down to his knees and the speedster kept tripping over it.

“I’m just glad the tack shop had my colors,” Steph said, fingering her eggplant outfit. “Now, where’s the . . . oh, great.”

Young Justice was idling near the warehouse doors Bart had flagged as suspicious, fidgeting nervously and looking really, really guilty.

“Hey, Rob, glad you’re still here,” Kon said, waving hesitantly as Tim’s squad approached. “Hey Spoiler, Impulse.”

“Hi, guys,” Bart said, less brightly than usual.

Steph just glared. Her hand twitched toward her emergency brick.

“Listen, we wanted to apologize again,” Kon said, turning to Tim. “What we did wasn’t cool—”

Tim narrowed his eyes. This sounded like an *emotional talk.*

“Nope,” he said, and shouldered past them. “Bart, where did you say the weapons were?”

“Over here!”

Tim ran after Bart’s trail of red light, absently swatting at the tendrils. It was hard not to pounce on them, but he resisted. Contrary to what the Bats believed, Tim could behave himself in public.

The gear was hidden in a stall near the back, near a few bulls munching on hay. Tim grinned at the animals, which backed up and pawed the ground nervously as he passed. He was coming back for them later. Rodeos had the best snacks.

“Rob, please, can you just hear us out?” Anita said, appearing behind him. “I’m sorry we didn’t formally invite you to the team. We should have been more considerate, but it wasn’t on pur—”

“But nothing, you shallow jerk,” Steph said. She rammed her finger into Anita’s collarbone. “If you didn’t want Robin around, you should have said so upfront, not led him on like this. He’s a sensitive little bean with no social awareness. You’re not allowed to hurt him like this!”

“How were we supposed to know it was him?” Cissie said. “Rob’s great, but we thought we were being stalked.”

Steph threw her hands into the air. “That’s what he does when he likes someone, you *idiots!”*

Tim tuned them out, more focused on completing the missions. He was so over this drama. Steph was more worked up than he was.

“This is weird,” Tim muttered as everyone started yelling. “Doesn’t look like kryptonite at all.”

Slobo slouched next to Tim, popping a bubble of chewing gum. “Yeah? How do you know, birdbrain?”

Tim pointed to the logo. “There’s an eighty-five percent chance that any kryptonite smuggling is done via Luthor’s shell companies, but this isn’t one of them. Trust me, I have them all memorized.”

He had to be prepared to throw hands with Luthor, since kryptonite threatened his and Bruce’s Supers.

“Uh huh, whatever, nerd.” Slobo looked bored. “Do I get to punch someone yet?”

Tim glanced back at the others. Steph was still shouting at Young Justice, increasing in volume. By now it wasn’t even about Tim. She was gesturing at her pins and accusing the team of being homophobes.

“If they keep that up, then probably,” Tim shrugged, wishing once again his main hoard wasn’t sentient. Collecting *this many* living creatures was a mistake. He’d blame it on Jack’s DNA, muddling up his perfectly good instincts.

Tim hooked a clawed finger around the rim of the crate and pried it open. The nice part about his shapeshifting was that it didn’t wreck his clothes, so he could switch from Robin gloves to weird, sharp glove-fingers anytime he wanted. He’d gone his whole life without needing can openers, levers, or crowbars. Magic was awesome.

Tim and Slobo both stared at the box’s interior with blank faces as their teammates continued to argue.

“What the hell am I looking at?” Slobo asked.

“Not kryptonite.” Tim said.

“No shit, you fraggin’ nerd.”

It was some kind of glowy, bazooka-shaped metal device with wires sticking out of it. It looked like the gun Bart had used at the last stakeout, except *way* more advanced. Tim moved the packing material aside and frowned. There were also big, foldable metal rings with weird symbols scrawled onto the rims.

He looked at Slobo. “Hey, you’re an alien, right? Tell me what I’m looking at.”

“I’m a genetically inferior blood clone of Lobo that’s going through puberty, I don’t know jack shit about science,” Slobo said, popping another bubble. “And what about you? You’re not human, why don’t *you* tell me what it is?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tim said blandly.

Slobo leaned forward and tapped his nose. “You may have fooled those morons, but I clocked you right away, freak face. You’re as normal as I am under that skin.”

Tim glanced at the others. Kon looked overwhelmed as he tried to stop Steph from jumping Cissie, and Anita was busy stopping Secret from going incorporeal and possessing something. None of them were paying attention to Tim at all. Steph’s anti-diplomacy skills were to be feared.

“I’m more human that you,” Tim grinned at Slobo. “And smarter, too.”

“Not tougher though,” Slobo growled. “Screw the mission, I signed up for smashing faces, not poking random gizmos. Yours will be perfect to start with.”

Tim hissed in delight. Violence was in the air. Tim was going to have so much fun tussling with this guy. He didn't get to fight nearly enough people with superstrength.

Before they could pounce on each other, there was a shout of alarm from the door.

Tim and Slobo looked up. Bart dropped his fidget spinner. Steph and Young Justice froze mid-rant.

A dozen badly disguised rodeo contestants stood in the threshold. There were several seconds of awkward silence, then the cowboys pulled out high-tech laser guns and started blasting.

Looked like Tim hadn't been the only one who appreciated a good disguise. Whoever was smuggling these mysterious devices was *really* into the Wild West.

***

Shoot-ups weren't like the movies made them out to be. Tim knew this since he was from Gotham, but he'd hoped it'd be different if everyone wore cowboy hats.

Boy, was he wrong.

Young Justice was pinned behind the stalls, dodging bullets while bulls roared and tried to get out of their pens. Superboy and the other bulletproof heroes jumped in front of the animals so they wouldn't get shot, and Tim and Steph threw batarangs at the goons from behind their cover.

"Imp, you have superspeed, use it!" Anita said, motioning for Bart to disarm the goons.

Bart blinked at her and did absolutely nothing until Tim gave him their secret signal, because he was a good hoard member who knew where his loyalties lay.

The team got the goons disarmed after a couple minutes. Tim pulled out his bat-rope to tie them up just as reinforcements arrived from the door behind him. Great.

“Why are there so many of them?” Steph said, bumping into Tim. “I’m running out of batarangs *and* spoilerangs.”

“I think they’re calling reinforcements on their radios,” Tim said, debating the merits of setting the entire stadium on fire.

Slobo leapt at a particularly burly goon, then got thrown backward into the mystery crates.

“Frag, that guy is a meta,” Slobo groaned, blinking stars from his eyes. “I call dibs!”

“Hey, no fair!” Tim said. He wanted to bite a superhuman’s arm off. It’d been too long.

“Ladies, ladies, there are crooks enough for all of us,” Kon said, blocking a laser before it hit Tim. “Just focus on the fight.”

“What, because *you* were so focused on the mission a second ago?” Steph said. “You weren’t even watching the doors!”

“Because *you* were *yelling* at me!”

The burly meta-human goon pulled out a bazooka gun very similar to the one Tim found in the crate. That wasn’t good.

“Hey, guys—” Tim said, ducking another gunshot.

“Yeah, because you’re a terrible, judgy person who didn’t even give Robin a chance.” Steph continued, not listening. “Just because he stalks people and makes cannibal jokes doesn’t mean he’s villain-coded, you big lumbering wad of hormones!”

“At least I’m not dressed like a Western Willy Wonka!!” Kon snapped.

“*Guys!”* Tim yelled, but it was too late.

The meta-goon fired a ray of light at Young Justice. Tim tackled Steph onto the floor as Slobo uppercutted Kon out of the way. Superboy hit the wall with a groan, but he luckily wasn’t hit by the laser.

Nobody was.

Instead, the blast hit the pile of crates full of mystery technology. The boxes exploded and a bright blue, floating rip in reality opened up, pulsing with power. A moment later, it blipped away, leaving nothing but empty space behind.

“That’s not good,” Tim said, before the meta-goon re-aimed and shot another laser blast.

It hit Tim, Steph, and Slobo dead on, and everything went white.

Chapter End Notes

Portal *fizzles closed*
YJ: 😨
Rodeo Goons: 😨
Bart: 😨😱😠😡🤬⚡*god mode, activated*

Y'all, I know you're mad at YJ, but they still my babies. *hugs them close* They're just dumb teenagers, have mercy.

Also, I would kill to see fanart Bart in his poncho.
(Here's the inspiration for it, if y'all are curious)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaucho

Maybe The Real Friends Are The Enemies We Made Along The Way?

Chapter Summary

Steph, Tim, and Slobo's portal adventure from hell.

Chapter Notes

Me *posts last chapter*
The entire comment section: ALTERNATE UNIVERSE! ISEKAI! TIM VS TIM!
Me *sweating nervously*: What?

Sorry, alternate universes didn't even occur to me until y'all mentioned it. 😅 I'm tempted to write a one shot of that happening, but that wasn't what I had planned for here, haha.

Also, apologies for taking so long to update. I wanted to finish one of my original novels, so I put myself on a fanfic ban, then got hit with the Self-Doubt bat after a while. We're doing better now, but it's been a crazy month. Hopefully, I can update more often from now on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If there was one thing worse than being surprise teleported, it was being surprise teleported in the middle of a gunfight and having two people land on him, elbows first.

Tim gasped as the wind was knocked out of him. Steph was *bony.*

He didn't have more than a second to focus on the pain though. He looked up and saw a dozen nerdy scientists staring at the three of them. Their white lab coats were dotted with electrical burns, and they held their clipboards held up like shields.

Behind the scientists were metal rings set up around conductors, buzzing with power. Some were lit up with semi-stable blue portals. They were guarded by robots.

No, not robots.

Amazos.

“Crap,” Tim said, scrambling to his feet. This was the textbook definition of *bad.*

“Seize them!” One of the scientists yelled, pointing at Tim & co. The guy had bright red Einstein-hair and a manic aura.

Half a dozen Amazo robots sprung into action, each one programmed to have super strength, regeneration, and (if Tim was unlucky) some of Superman's powers.

“Die!” Slobo yelled, surging forward with a haymaker.

A simple strategy, but seeing as how they were cornered, go-for-broke fighting was their only option.

“Run for the nearest portal,” Tim told Steph as Slobo tried to solo seven robots at once. “Every hero for themselves!”

Tim ducked an Amazo's laser eyes and hauled his hoard member toward the nearest glowing portal of mystery.

Unfortunately, he only ducked the laser, not the body slam.

Tim let go of Steph's hand and hit the ground at high speed as an Amazo rammed into him. His head cracked against the concrete.

Tim groaned and blinked stars from his eyes. Everything was grainy. He felt like a pickax was tunneling into his skull. He tried to get to his feet but couldn't get his hands under him.

“Robin!” He heard Steph yell.

He cracked his eyes open and saw her and Slobo get thrown on the ground. Slobo was covered in burns. Some went straight through his skin, but he was already regenerating. Healing factor, nice.

Tim snarled and tried to lunge toward them, but mighty dragon though he be, head injuries were still debilitating. He didn't even get to his feet before an Amazo stepped on his back and shoved his face back against the floor.

“That's enough out of you,” the manic scientist said, approaching with a syringe. “You fools are not mighty enough to stop our plans!”

Tim hissed and tried to shapeshift, but it was like trying to make a sandcastle out of wet spaghetti. As easy as he made shifting look, it took concentration to manipulate his cells. His possible concussion made that a pipe dream.

He barely got his claws out before a needle was jammed into his neck. The last thing he saw was Steph—his favorite, Waffle-obsessed *hoard member*— kicking and screaming as she and Slobo were restrained, before everything went dark.

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Tim woke up in a cell with all his gear stripped.

Not cool, villains. Not cool.

He kept his eyes closed until the world stopped spinning, then rolled onto his elbows. He was used to pain (thanks Mom) but head injuries were a special purgatory. It felt like his brain had been soaked in lemon juice and put in a blender. The leftover chunks were metaphorically oozing out his ears.

“Stupid evolution,” Tim slurred, blinking black spots out of his eyes. “Pain sucks.”

He wished he'd been born with a healing factor. This was the worst.

After several minutes, Tim felt less like throwing up. If it was a concussion, it wasn't too bad. Lucky him. At least now, he could pay attention to his surroundings.

He'd been put in a solitary cell, which made Tim's blood boil. They separated him from Steph, his *hoard.* Unforgivable. The only way out was a reinforced metal door with a small window. He'd also been put in nasty handcuffs and chained to the floor. Again, not cool.

If Tim were a normal human without any vigilante gear, it'd have been a bad situation. Luckily, nobody had muzzled him, so Tim wasn't phased. He bit off his handcuffs and spat venom onto the cell door's hinges. They sizzled and melted into goop, making the door easy to kick down.

“Noobs,” he said, wiping venom off his lips. “Cages don't work on dragons.”

Adult venom rocked.

Tim stumbled through the halls and kept a hand on the wall for balance. He needed fresh air and an ice pack *yesterday,* but he ignored the pain. Forget his injuries, not knowing if Steph was alright was agony.

“I'm never letting her leave Gotham again,” he grumbled.

A free-range hoard was a mistake. Never again. Steph was staying within grabbing distance from now on, end of discussion. He'd relocate Bart while he was at it. Luring him to Gotham would be easy; he just had to make a trail of fruit snacks that led to the panic room, then lock the speedster inside. Easy peasy.

But first, Operation Save Spoiler.

. . . And Slobo.

Tim guessed he could rescue him too, while he was at it.

It was taking forever to find them though.

The secret base they'd been teleported to was *huge* and maze-like. Every corridor was the same bland, white tile with no landmarks, and the doors were all locked. Tim made a mental note to figure out where and what this place was once they were safe. As far as he could tell from licking the air, it was underground, which didn't narrow down its location.

Tim had to ninja through three separate floors before he picked up the smell of Steph's shampoo. By then he had a twenty-three-step plan on how to blow this place up with its own generators, and had made a personal vow to rain destruction down on all the scientists. Plotting mass destruction helped settle his nerves.

Honestly, it was a good thing he found Steph, or he would've thrown Bruce's no-kill rule out the window then and there.

“There you guys are,” Tim breathed, dashing over to a pair of cells. The smell of Apple-Cinnamon shampoo was overwhelming, even with a solid metal door between him and them. “Psst, Spoy Spoy, Slobo, can you hear me?”

Frantic banging on the other side of the door answered him.

Tim used his acid trick on the door to dissolve the locks and rushed inside. His brain buzzed with worry and head trauma.

“Boy, and I glad to see you,” Steph said. “Are you alright?”

She and Slobo were tied up a lot more securely than Tim had been. Their feet were chained to the floor and their hands were manacled together. Both looked battered and Steph's cowboy hat was gone, but luckily her Spoiler costume hadn't been touched.

“Brainboozled, but thriving,” Tim said, grabbing a lock pick out of Steph's hair. “Why didn't they take your stuff?”

He jimmied it into her cuffs and picked the locks, then did Slobo's next. It'd have been faster to bite restraints off, but he didn't want to accidentally hurt them. His teeth were sharp, and their flesh was squishy.

Steph shrugged. “One of the scientists was a woman. She said she'd put cyanide in everyone's drinks if they undressed me. Like, she's evil, but respect.”

Tim hummed. He liked that evil scientist. Maybe he'd even spare her from his wrath.

“Nice trick,” Slobo said once both he and Steph were free. He nodded to the door as Tim's acid continued melting the locks into goo. Molten metal dripped onto the floor and ate into the tiles. It'd probably drip through several floors before it stopped.

“Since when do you carry industrial strength *acid* in your mouth?” Steph asked, rubbing her wrists. “Is this a new Bat-thing nobody told me about?”

“No, it's a me-thing. Always be prepared," Tim said glibly, delighted that Steph was finally joining in with gaslighting everyone. Bart would be so happy.

“You're both idiots,” Slobo said, pinning them with a look that had Alfred-level dryness.

“Shut up, meat head,” Steph said. “At least I didn't egg on the evil guys. Get a load of this, Robin, Slobo here pissed off the scientists so much they decided to throw us into a black hole.”

“*What?”* Tim said.

Steph pulled a domino mask out of her belt and slapped it onto her face. “Yeah, seriously. I thought Jason was the only person that annoying. The scientist dudes were going to question us, but changed their minds and went to calibrate the teleporters to yeet us into outer space. It's a good thing you found us when you did or we'd be cosmic spaghetti.”

Tim felt a growl begin in his ribcage. His rage peaked into an artificial calm. Everything became crystal clear, and he casually set aside Bruce's three rules. How many pieces should he dismember these scientists into?

Slobo hissed and readied his fists. “Quit that, freakazoid. Your bloodlust is stinking up the air.”

Tim glared at him. Stupid other apex predator, harshing his mellow. It wasn't Tim's fault he made other living things shiver by sheer proximity. That was Janet's DNA at work, and she was *way* scarier.

“Rude, but yeah, you're giving off serial killer vibes again,” Steph said, rubbing her arms. “Darn it, Rob, I thought I was finally immune.”

“Give it a few more years,” Tim said, still glaring at Slobo. “You'll go numb to it eventually. Anyway, let's get moving. It's time we show these mystery villains who they're messing with.”

Steph and Slobo grinned. Violence was something the three of them could all agree with.

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It should have been easy to shut things down and escape, but life had a funny way of messing that up.

Two hours, a dozen failed escapes, and a mad dash away from an army of half constructed Amazos later, and the three of them were still trapped in the secret lab. They hadn't even found another teleporter-gun to hijack on their way out.

So much for Tim's twenty-step-plan. All it took was Slobo rolling a Nat 1 on stealth for all three of them to be spotted by security. He ruined their chance as espionage! The scientists they'd been eavesdropping on had *just* started talking about how they were combining magic and science. Two more minutes and Tim would've known who was bankrolling this thing and which magic user was helping make teleporter guns.

But no, Slobo had to trip over his stupidly big feet right as an Amazo guard walked past. Stupid alien clone-wannabe. Now they were being pursued. *Again.*

“I hope soloing that Amazo was worth it, you waste of Space dust,” Steph said as they ran from another three robots. “Your testosterone is going to get us killed!”

“Shut up, purple girl,” Slobo growled. “I'll rip your spine out too. Just give me a reason.”

“Don't touch her,” Tim hissed, his eyes glowing behind his domino.

While it was impressive that Slobo decapitated an Amazo and ripped its spinal cord out with one hand, doing the same thing to Tim's hoard was instant death. His head was rattling like a maraca, but he was getting his focus back. He'd make Slobo regret his short, miserable existence in a heartbeat.

“I can take you,” Slobo said, fingers flexing.

Tim bared his teeth, but before he could take a swipe at the alien's eyes, Steph grabbed them both by the ear and yanked them onto the ground. Half a dozen laser blasts whizzed over their heads.

“Less grandstanding, more survival,” she said, yanking them back into motion. “You can duke it out *after* we're not flambeed.”

Tim and Slobo shared disappointed expressions. Foiled again. There was no justice in this world.

They were trying to find the room they'd been teleported into. All its portals made it the perfect place to escape. Unfortunately, the secret base was a labyrinth. Tim's mental map was a spaghetti bowl of tunnels, intersecting floors, and secret passageways. If it weren't for gravity, he wouldn't even know which was was up.

“Over there!” Steph said.

An elevator shone like a beacon of hope at the end of the hall.

“But the robots—” Tim started. The three Amazos was gaining on them. “There's no way we'll make it.”

“It's our only hope!” Steph said.

Their only hope turned out to be fool's gold. The elevator doors opened and another six Amazos stepped out.

“CEASE RESISTING. GIVE INTO THE INEVITABLE,” One of them said, aiming a laser-arm cannon at them.

“Shut up, Cyberman!” Steph said, pinwheeling her arms to stop. “Crap, now what do we do?”

They were pincered between Amazos on both sides.

Tim rubbed his head, wincing as another lance of pain jagged through his temple. When he got home he was taking so much Ibuprofen.

“We die, that's what,” Slobo said. “Frag, I didn't even make it to a year old. At least I'll go down fighting.”

“We can take them,” Tim said. He cracked his knuckles.

It would've looked more intimidating if he had his suit instead of the flimsy, form-fitting compression clothes he'd worn under his rodeo disguise. Some human weapons would've also been nice. Luckily, he came with lethality built in.

The three of them dropped back to the ground as two Amazos opened fire. One of the laser beams went wide and hit another robot, crashing it into the wall. The rest slowly marched forward, mechanical voices telling them to surrender and die.

And. Not or. Amazo diplomacy skills were terrible. They wouldn't last a second on a speech and debate team.

"Forget it Tim, I'm crazy but not that crazy," Steph said, pulling him back from pouncing. “Amazos are designed to go toe to toe with metas like Superman. Bats are stealth heroes, we're not built for this!”

“I can take Superman,” Slobo growled. “Just give me a reason.”

“Shut up metalhead! Crap, this is it,” Steph said, pulling out her final spoilerang. "This isn't how I wanted to die. I still have six seasons of Supernatural to binge!"

She flung it at one of the Amazos, then pulled a smoke grenade out of her pocket. If they were lucky it'd block the Amazos line of sight.

"That's your reason to live?" Slobo said. "Come on, chick, take this seriously."

"I'm taking this as seriously as I take Destiel, you heathen. Lay off!" She snapped.

Tim rolled his eyes. "We're not going to die. Stop being so dramatic, Spoy. You're the definition of YOLO. Embrace the carnage."

Tim barrel-rolled to the left to dodge five laser blasts. Whoever programmed these Amazos had watched too much Star Wars; they aimed like Storm Troopers.

“No carnage,” Steph said. “Use your big brain and Macguyver us a way out of this, Robin. I can buy us maybe five seconds, then we're burnt toast with no butter.”

Tim pulled a face.

Everyone always assumed he planned for every scenario, but all Tim had was a migraine and a possible concussion. Planning wouldn't save them. They needed action.

“Nice working with you, purple-freak and sick-freak,” Slobo said, spitting into his palms. “I'll see you in Hell.”

Slobo launched himself at the nearest Amazo with a war cry. He gut-shotted the robot so hard he dented its metal plating and smashed it into the ceiling.The next moment, a laser blast hit him in the back and knocked him onto the ground. A second later, he was back up swinging, tank top singed but skin already healing.

“Don't be a hero, we go out together!” Steph said. She chucked the smoke grenade onto the floor and ran after him, using Slobo's distraction to throw a bola around another Amazo's legs.

The rest of the machines' eyes glowed red. They went from trying to pick the three of them off with ranged attacks to rushing forward to tear them apart bare handed.

Tim rolled his eyes.

Smoke filled the air from Steph's smoke grenade, giving him cover as he bent his knees, concentrated, and felt his skin ripple into scales.

Humans (and whatever Slobo was), always making things difficult. It's like they forgot they had a dragon on their side.

Looks like he had to save the day as usual.

Tim was still unsteady from having his head slammed into concrete, but he was cognizant enough to shift. The familiar pull of magic reorganized him from the DNA up, just like it always did.

Muscle stretched and bones elongated. His mouth filled with acid as rows of needle sharp teeth sprouted out of his gum line. His spine popped as it added new vertebrae, spines breaking skin to ridge his back, and his wings unfurled with a snap.

Tim pounced, claws extended, and landed on the first Amazo. It was silly to be mad at a robot, but it was attacking Steph, so Tim had the wrath of Dick denied cereal and the vindictiveness of Jason scorned.

The smoke from Steph's grenade compromised the robot's vision, so it didn't see him coming. Tim went for its eyes, tearing and biting its face until its vision receptors shorted out. Acid dripped down the robots face, corrupting and melting its circuits.

Tim allowed himself a vicious grin before another Amazo grabbed his tail and yanked him off. Tim let out a half-growl half-eep and landed belly first on the floor. His tail was squeezed in the Amazo's fist, and Tim knew there'd be a bruise on it for weeks.

No more mister nice guy.

It was time to bring out the *fire.*

"*Holy guacamole!"* Steph yelled as Tim released a hug jet of flame.

The fire caught on the walls, floor, and Amazos, burning like Greek Fire. That was new. Apparently, his venom was flammable. *Nice.*

The smoke from Steph's grenade dissipated, revealing Spoiler and Slobo pressed against the wall, only slightly singed. There were four Amazos left. Some seemed to have taken each other out, the one Tim mauled was twitching on the floor, and another two were covered in fire.

Tim eyed them, unimpressed. Amazos were supposed to be tougher than this. These had to be knock-off ones.

“Who brought the flamethrower?” Slobo asked, eyes landing on Tim. “Can I have one—Frag, a dragon? Nasty!”

“A what?!” Steph squawked, shoving Slobo in front of her in alarm.

Tim bit the Amazo he'd been mauling and threw it into some of the remaining robots to slow them down, then shook himself back into human shape.

“Not nasty, awessssome,” He snapped, tongue still forked. “Get it right, Ssslobo.”

“Tim?” Steph said, stumbling back to grab the wall. She was wearing a domino mask instead of her normal, full-face cowl, so Tim saw the blood drain from her face. She looked, to put it politely, like a cartoon character after getting hit by a wrecking ball. *“Tim,* is that *you?”*

“Yes?” Tim said, then had to duck as an Amazo tried to grab his throat and rip his jaw off.

Tim swiped with his claws but the Amazo dodged. Annoying. Time to use one of Janet's favorite tactics.

“Quick! Run while they're distracted,” he said, then shifted back to full dragon and wrapped his coils around the Amazo to pin down its limbs. He squeezed so hard the metal frame creaked. While it couldn't move, Tim mauled its throat until the head was barely connected.

“Oh God,” he heard Steph say. “Oh God of Waffles above.”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” Slobo chanted.

Tim let out an irritated growl. Steph and Slobo were useless. They had to *escape,* not ogle his amazing fighting prowess, but Steph seemed to have lost her ability to move or think, and Slobo was *Slobo.* It was down to Tim to be the only competent member of the team *again.*

Life was so unfair.

Tim didn't have time for humans blue screening. He was grumpy, tired, in pain, and under fire from robots. Whatever was making Steph act like a living 404 error wasn't his problem. He wanted out of this hell-hole yesterday.

He dodged a punch from an Amazo, spun around, and grabbed Steph with his teeth.

“Oh my god, no—*let go of me!”* Steph yelled, kicking at him.

Tim ignored her. One down, one to go—

He hissed as Slobo jumped onto his back and grabbed his horns.

“Go, go, go!” The alien yelled and *yanked* Tim's mane.

Tim saw red. He almost death-rolled him into paste. It was tempting, but there wasn't time.

He uncoiled and launched down the hallway. A laser grazed his flank. Another almost tore through his wing, but Tim contorted out of the way. It hit the wall instead.

His wings flared as he picked up speed, retracing their steps to the hall with the elevator. If there was one thing you could count on in a building with elevators, it was that they usually led to a *roof* , which meant escape.

“Left, left!” Slobo yelled, yanking Tim's head by the horns. “I just saw the portal room!”

Tim turned on a dime and went where Slobo was pointing. Portals sounded better than trying to get out of this maze the old-fashioned way.

Alarms blared and security was crawled out of the woodwork. Tim dodged bullets, lasers, and arrows as he beelined it back to wherever the portals were. Steph was still screaming and her

struggles were making it really hard not to drop her. She was lucky he had good self control. If any other dragon had a wriggly thing trying to pry their mouth open they'd bite down and *chew,* no questions asked.

Tim, Slobo, and Steph arrived back where they started, emerging on a catwalk above the main room, which was a production floor full of ring-shaped portals.

Some glowed blue and sinister. Others were being maintenance by scientists in lab coats. Amazos, human security guards, and gun towers dotted the rooms. Several jeeps were parked by portals, and there was an entire section of the floor dedicated to costumes and disguises.

Tim still had no idea who these people were, but this was a bigger operation that he'd thought. It was going to take planning to bring these guys in, and more firepower than Tim currently had.

Escape first. Portal Frenzy Electric Boogaloo later. He had a hoard member to return to her natural habitat. Figuring out what the hell was going on in this labyrinth villain HQ could wait.

Tim tossed Steph into the air. Slobor grabbed and hauled her onto Tim's back, which his mouth was finally free. He roared, stealth abandoned, and dive-bombed the production floor.

Five gun towers, all the security guards, and a hundred wide-eyed scientists turned toward them.

“No, stay away from my magnum opus!” The red-haired weirdo yelled. He tried to grab his hair dramatically, but smacked himself with the clipboard in his hands.

One of the other scientists tackled the guy as Tim flew overhead, so he couldn't bite the guy's head off. Shame. Maybe next time.

Tim wanted to burn the entire place to the ground, but since he wasn't bulletproof he couldn't risk it. He settled for setting the costume section on fire, smashing a roomba with a laser on it with his tail, and spitting acid at one of the generators before throwing himself at the nearest activated portal.

Going through it felt like taking an ice bath with a toaster. Tim grimaced as electricity danced over his skin and pulled him apart atom by atom. It felt like when he shifted, except non-magical and icky.

The world went white again and Tim, Steph, and Slobo left the evil, portal people behind.

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They reappeared a thousand feet in the air, over the Rocky Mountains.

Tim flailed, trying to figure out which way was up. Steph screamed at opera volume and Slobo lost his lunch, but Tim was able to right himself and get air in his wings eventually.

Tim needed to find a place to land ASAP, if only for their stomachs' sakes. Bipeds didn't handle altitude changes well.

But first he had to finish off the couple of Amazos that followed them through the portal. There were only a couple, thankfully. The rest probably stayed behind to put out the fires Tim started.

Despite his headache, the panicked bipeds, and the disaster that'd been the rodeo, the prospect of an aerial battle was exciting. Dragons loved battles to the death, especially when they were in the air.

The Amazos could fly, but they had nothing on his areal acrobatics. Tim had the high ground, and this would be a great way to relieve some stress.

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After doing some loop de loops, dives, and peregrine-falcon level maneuvers, the Amazos were a couple of lumps of melted metal on the ground below.

Tim ached all over, but he was in a much better mood. Who knew killing robots was so cathartic?

The fight was over, but Tim flew several hundred extra miles north, just in case the smuggler/scientist people tried to track them. He touched down in the wilderness in Yellowstone National Park and shook the moisture off his scales.

Tim stretched his spine, feeling the burn. He hadn't done a flight that long in a while. He was going to be *sore* tomorrow. Note to self, more endurance training for cross-country flights.

Steph and Slobo collapsed onto the ground and moaned. It hadn't been a gentle flight, especially when Tim started flying upside-down.

Once he shifted back into human shape and made sure they weren't going to die, Tim pulled out his phone and called his hoard.

"*Hi, this is Dick Grayson. I'm not at the phone right now, but I'll totes make time for a callback if you leave your name and number. Especially if it's you, Babs, love of my life, my smoopsy-poo, the marshmallows to my Lucky Charms, the—"*

"Dick? Hi, it's Tim. When you get a moment can you call me?" Tim said, "I was at a rodeo, but then there was an army of robots chasing me and Steph, Slobo got motion sickness, we almost died again, and I lost your hat. Also, I think I have head trauma, and you were wrong. Friendship isn't magic, it's a lie and I hate you. 'Kay, bye."

Tim hung up, then debated calling Young Justice to let them know he and the others hadn't been vaporized into another dimension.

Nah.

They might try to apologize again. Tim wasn't a fan of that. He'd just shoot them a text later. Maybe this time they'd actually reply.

"That was fraggin awesome," Slobo said, back on his feet. He looked green. "When we fight, our death match is gonna be airborne. I got a super-cycle, I can take you."

“You wish,” Tim snorted, pocketing his phone. “But yes, we're totally sparring later. How do you feel about amputation?”

Slobo wasn't hoard (yet), so Tim didn't mind dishing out the punishment. Besides, treating Tim like a rodeo horse was not cool. He liked giving Cass rides, but there were limits. Pulling on his mane was forbidden. Tim would rip off an arm as penalty.

“I got regen, we cool,” Slobo said, dusting ash off his ruined tank top. “Just don't eat my hair.”

Please, like Tim wanted to. Slobo smelled like he dumped an entire gel bottle in his mohawk. Tim preferred natural hair products for his diet, and Slobo had *none* of those. He"d stick with eating flesh, thank you very much.

“Our fight will be legendary. Just don't tell the others about me,” Tim said. “I'm putting my human act to the test. Impulse and I have a bet on who will figure it out first. It's been months, and they still think I'm human.”

Slobo rolled his pupilless eyes. “Morons, it's obvious. You smell like a slaughterhouse.”

“Thanks.”

The two of them high-fived.

Tim didn't think this was friendship, but whatever. Friendship was overrated, as seen earlier today. He'd take this weird, hostile urge to murder each other over a “normal” relationship any day.

Slobo refused a ride home and wandered off to find a grizzly bear to wrestle. He said that when he got bored of the American wilderness he'd whistle for his sentient motor-cycle to pick him up, so Tim didn't get to “accidentally” drop him from a thousand feet up. Bummer.

“Ready to go home?” Tim asked Steph after waving bye to Slobo.

Steph didn't answer. She stared at the mountain vistas with a blank look. The fringe on her Spoilerfied cowboy jacket swayed in the wind.

Tim was worried about her. She'd been silent as the grave since he tossed her into the portal. Steph wasn't supposed to be quiet. It was the antithesis to her nature.

She wasn't injured though, so he wasn't sure what was wrong. Maybe taking her away from Gotham wasn't a good idea. She probably needed to get back to her natural habitat.

“You okay, Spoy?” Tim asked, poking her face.

“I'm doing amazing, thank you,” she said serenely. “Can I borrow your comm? Mine broke earlier.”

“Uh, sure.” Tim handed her his ear piece, which he'd muted before leaving Gotham.

Steph grabbed it, switched to the emergency broadcast signal, and screamed into it.

“Was anybody over the last couple years going to tell me Tim was a dragon or was I just supposed to *figure that out myself?!”*

A flock of starlings took flight, startled by the noise. Tim rubbed his ears, wincing as another stab of pain lanced his temples.

It took him a moment to get the ringing out of his ears. Once he did, he wanted to groan.

She didn't know? *How?*

Stupid How to Be Human Classes. They were working way too well.

Chapter End Notes

Who is the manic, red-haired scientists? Half The Size fans will know. 😉

The batfamily & Steph over the last two years:

Babs: Hey Spoiler, tell lizard-boy to stop muting his comms.
Dick: You're a good kid, Steph. A ball of chaos, but at least you listen to reason. Unlike SOME adorable, winged, murder hobos I know. *glares at Tim*
Jason: Spoiler, stay out of my territory. I know the little scaly cryptid asked you to spy on me.
Bruce: Tim's last name will never not be ironic. Drake, honestly. Hidden in plain sight is a generous way of putting it.
Alfred: Ah yes, another raw steak for my most abnormal child.

Steph: Golly gee, y'all have weird nicknames for Tim.

Spite is the New Black

Chapter Summary

Steph before the rodeo: I'm a barbie girl in a barbie world.

Steph now: I am death, destroyer of worlds.

Chapter Notes

Me *posts the last chapter* That's nice, now I can take a few days to relax before worrying about the next one.
sees the calendar and realizes that today is Happy Families' anniversary
Me: WE RIDE AT DAWN!

Enjoy the one-year mark for this monster of a fic. I did 52 chapters in a year, that's a personal record! 🥳

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim did not have a concussion, but his headache was in full swing.

It'd been a long flight from Yellowstone to the nearest zeta tube. After zapping back to Gotham, Steph screamed at the Waynes for an hour while Tim got looked over by Alfred. Her voice echoed off the stalactites and scared most of the bats outside, robbing Tim of one of his favorite snacks.

"I get it, you're mad," Dick said, hands up defensively, "but why take it out on us? Tim is right there!"

"You think I'm mad at *Tim?"* Steph said, gesturing to the med bay. "There isn't a rational thought behind his eyes. Look at him."

"What?" Tim said, looking up from where he was licking one of the scabs on his elbow.

“Okay, fair point,” Dick said, as if Tim weren’t right there *and* the smartest one in the room. “But still, Steph, you need to calm down.”

Steph did not calm down. Telling her to cool her jets was as effective as putting out a fire with gasoline.

“You’re a bunch of two-faced, bald-headed, ancient windbags with trust issues and multi-generational idiocy!” She said, causing everybody but Alfred to reach for their hair with a wince.

“And you,” Steph whirled on Cass, who was eating popcorn on the hood of the batmobile. “You knew! You’ve known and you haven’t *told* me for *months.* Does our friendship mean nothing?”

Cass swallowed a fistful of popcorn and snorted. “Best friend and best entertainment. Two for one special.”

“*I bought waffles for you, woman!”*

Cass just laughed. She was a devious, maniacal prankster. A human after Tim’s own heart.

“That’s it, best friend status revoked,” Steph said to Cass, then pointed at all of them. “You’ll pay for this, all of you. My wrath is endless and my pettiness divine. I’m going to watch you suffer!”

“I guess that’s fair,” Dick muttered, looking ten years older.

Steph huffed and stormed out of the Batcave in a flurry of purple fringe, muttering vengeful oaths under her breath.

They watched her go; Bruce and Dick with resignation, Cass with amusement, and Tim squinting because his head felt like a pincushion used as a stress ball.

“This is becoming a recurring problem,” Alfred said, sticking a final Bandaid on Tim’s scrapes. They were all Batman themed because Tim refused to wear any of the other JLA ones. “Perhaps we

should create an onboarding video for new vigilantes, master Bruce."

"Hrn," Bruce said, rubbing his ear.

"Very funny, B," Dick said. "Don't delude yourself. There will definitely be more of us. If it's not you adopting someone, it'll be Tim dragging another maladjusted human home for his collection."

Cass clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes, more little siblings to rule. Minions for days."

Bruce's next grunt was a mix between excitement and dismay. He turned to Tim and sighed loudly.

Tim sighed too. Dick was right, but he didn't have to like it. Hoarding humans was a mistake. He hoped he didn't keep doing it. This hoard was already too big, even without counting his disaster to befriend Young Justice (which he *wasn't* thinking about now or ever again).

"There we are," Alfred said, stepping back to appraise the bandages wrapped around Tim's head. "Right as rain. You'll stay home from patrol tonight, but there shouldn't be lasting damage. You were lucky, master Tim."

Tim hissed and stuck a few more Bandaids on his arm so each side had an equal amount. He hadn't been lucky, the Amazo who got a cheap shot on him had. Tim was galled that a robot took him out. How embarrassing. Janet would never let him live this down.

"While you recover, I suggest you think of a suitable apology for leaving miss Stephanie in the dark," Alfred said. "That includes you two, as well."

Bruce and Dick nodded forlornly. Cass was unrepentant. Tim knew that her moral code only extended to homicide. She crossed all the lines if she thought it was funny. Steph had her work cut out from her trying to make Cass regret this.

"Yeah, we'll do that Alfie," Dick said. He turned to Tim. "Make sure you make this up to her, buddy. She's really upset."

Once again, Tim wanted to know how that was his fault. For a bunch of detectives, his chosen humans were not observant. Apparently, Tim had a thing for morons.

Still, it’d been a long day and the last thing he needed was another lecture, so he just nodded and let kept quiet.

Hoard drama was always so tedious.

***

The next day on Saturday, Tim and Steph went back to their favorite cafe and sat in the outdoor area. The weather was lovely. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Tim suspected it was an omen of evil. There’d been good weather all week and Gotham wasn’t built for that. People were getting sunburned and paranoid.

The waitress Tim liked wasn’t on shift, so he didn’t get to have amazing, experimental food combinations, but the parfait he got was good. He added hot sauce and pepper to it for an extra kick, but otherwise it was perfect.

"So, on top of everything else, I kissed a dragon?" Steph said, after Tim went through the painful, excruciating process of telling his life story. He’d rather his hoard handled the ickiness of explaining of petty details like his entire existence, but Steph was refusing to talk to them, so it fell to Tim.

"You attacked my mouth, yes," Tim said, taking a bite of his parfait.

He refused to ever be associated with romance. He'd get around to that in 40-50 years, if ever. It was gross and his and Steph's saliva swap did *not* count.

Steph hummed. "Cool. Not a lot of girls can brag about that. Although that does explain your breath. I thought you'd had a rare steak for lunch."

"I mean, I could've," Tim shrugged, "but I usually stick with rats and alley cats while I'm on patrol."

Steph choked. Smoothie dribbled onto her white shirt as she frantically wiped her tongue against her hand.

"Tim, you disgusting little freak," she said, "that's so gross!"

"You said you *liked* that I was a freak," Tim said.

"That was before you told me you're basically Hannibal Lector!"

Several passersby stared in alarm before moving on. Tim wondered what their deal was; this was a pretty normal conversation by Gotham standards.

Steph whacked him with her fashion magazine. "Never violate my lips again!"

"*You* kissed *me,"* Tim said, hiding behind his menu.

"That's beside the point!" Steph collapsed back into her chair and rubbed her temples. "Mom was right, I was young and foolish when we were kinda sorta together. Next I guy I date, I'm doing a DNA test to make sure they're not hiding scaly genes."

Tim ordered her another plate of waffle fries and frowned. Steph hadn't done a DNA swab on him already? Even though she'd wanted to kiss him? That didn't make sense. How did you even know you liked someone if you weren't obsessively researching everything about them and making photo walls of their day-to-day life?

Girls were so weird.

After a bit more back and forth, Steph forgave Tim for not telling her about himself. All it took was unlimited Waffle House gift cards for life. Tim would've bought her the franchise if she asked, but

as long as she was happy the gift cards would do.

“I know you,” Steph explained. “I’m pissed you didn’t share this *extremely relevant* part of yourself, but I bet you didn’t even know why you should’ve.”

“How is my being a dragon relevant to anything?” Tim asked. “It’s not a big deal.”

Steph gestured at him. “There you go, proving my point. You’re a spacecase, Tim. You always omit vital information. Still, to think I thought it was just you being ace that made you dislike kissing. . . or aro. Or both? Whatevs. Who knew it was a whole species-thing instead. That’s a major plot twist.”

“Being what?” Tim said.

“The people I’m mad at are the bats,” Steph continued, glaring at the horizon. “Babs too. They all knew and didn’t tell me. It’s unforgivable. I need to get payback. They’ll rue the day they did this to me.”

“They’re very bad at communicating,” Tim said absently. He typed ‘ace, kissing’ into his phone under the table, but all Google pulled up were videos about Ace Frehley. He shrugged and exited the tab. Probably wasn’t important. “I’m working on it with them, but they don’t take me seriously.”

Steph’s face became as dry as Alfred’s whenever Tim told him antique furniture tasted better than the IKEA brand. “You don’t say.”

The waiter came back and handed them their check. Tim paid it and dumped the rest of his change onto the table as a tip. There were several gold dollars and a fifty.

“How about this, Tim,” Steph said. “You help me make their lives miserable, and I call us square after years of lies and deception.”

“You said we were already square,” Tim frowned. “I’m giving you Waffle House for life.”

Steph waved her hand. “Details.”

Tim shrugged. Fair enough. “Ok, but only if you keep helping me gaslight Young Justice. Bart and I have been *trying* to get them to figure out I’m not human for almost a year. Slobo is the only one who noticed, and that’s only because he has a better nose than a bloodhound.”

“Wait, *that’s* what you’ve been trying to—?” Steph’s lips curled into a malicious grin. “You know what, count me in. Those jerks deserve to suffer. Summer vacation is going to be fun this year.”

Tim beamed. New official dragon ally, get!

***

By Sunday, Tim thought the drama would be over. He was cleared for patrol, the rodeo was over, and Tim sent a report to Young Justice of the lab he and the others found with a note that said “Have fun handling this on your own, not-friend people” and silenced his cellphone. Everything was settling back to normal.

Sure, Steph was preparing to rain vengeance down on the Bats, but that wasn’t Tim’s problem. He was happy to let her cause as much carnage as she wanted as long as he wasn’t in the crossfire.

He set out for patrol and actually used his comm for once, bantering with Bruce (who grunted back), Jason (who also grunted back), Babs (who actually knew how to use her vocal cords) and Cass (who replied with sound effects and audio clips from YouTube).

Ivy and Scarecrow were still loose, but tracking them down was challenging. Scarecrow vanished into thin air so thoroughly ghosts would be impressed, and the only Ivy spotting they had was of a woman with similar features visiting a gay bar and downing three martinis before crying into a pile of napkins for twenty minutes.

Needless to say, that wasn’t Ivy’s M.O., so the bats were a bit confused.

“Maybe she’s gone straight?” Tim suggested after hiking through Robinson park for the third time that night. None of the plants were mutating. It was boring.

“Tim, I don’t know how to tell you this,” Dick said, “but if it was Ivy in that gay bar, the last thing she is is straight.”

“You know what I mean,” Tim said, swatting a tree branch out of his face. “There’s no sign of manic violence or unhinged schemes here at all. It’s a complete letdo—”

Tim’s whining was cut off as he was tackled and thrown into a pond.

Water slapped him, hard as concrete, and sucked him under. Tim swallowed a mouthful of duck-flavored water before closing his mouth. He kicked wildly at his assailant until he hit something yielding.

They let go and Tim burst to the surface, hacking water out of his lungs. He moved to pounce, then caught sight of his attacker’s red and white uniform.

“Bart?” he coughed.

“Tim!”

Impulse tackled him into a hug so tight Tim lost all the air he just got. He wheezed and tried to pry Bart’s arms off him, but it was a losing battle.

“I was so worried!” Bart babbled while Tim choked. “You got yeeted, and I couldn’t find you because the bad guy’s laser gun broke, and thenIgotdistractedgettingrevengeandYoungJusticeisstupidwithoutyouand—”

“Brt,” Tim wheezed. “C’t brth.”

Bart let go. Tim fell back on his butt, ankle deep in the pond, and gasped for air.

“Sorry,” Bart said. “I’m just really glad you’re alright.”

“I texted you days ago,” Tim said, sending an all-clear signal over the comms. The bats were panicking after hearing him get thrown into a body of water. “Like, literally, I messaged you as soon as I had signal.”

“Oh yeah,” Bart blinked and pulled out his phone. “I forgot. Sorry, I just got back from Dinosaur time. I got really mad when you were taken, so I grabbed some of the evil dudes and transported them back to the Cretaceous Period to get eaten by giant reptiles. Max found out and made me bring them back though. He said I would wreck the Space-Time continuum, so he made me spend days tracking them down through the old-timey jungle.”

Bart pouted and muttered about controlling, stick-in-the-mud, moded uncles. Tim felt that on a spiritual level, even though he didn’t have any uncles.

“So, I’m guessing you just saw the messages and rushed over?” Tim said.

Bart rested his head on Tim’s shoulder and nodded. “I thought you were dead. It was so grifing awful. You’re my first friend ever, Tim.”

Tim muted his comm. Dick was cooing in his ear, sounding touched, and ruining the vibe. Bart was having *Emotions,* this was no time for nonsense!

“Don’t worry, I won’t die even if they kill me,” Tim said, channeling all his capable dragon energy for assurance. “And if I do, you have my permission to bring me back to life somehow.”

Lazarus pit, time travel, dubious magic ritual, it was all good in Tim’s books.

“Thanks Tim,” Bart said, immediately perking up. “I’ll definitely do that.”

Tim breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been worried Bart would cry. Disaster averted.

“Come on,” Tim said, standing up. Pond water dripped off his soaked suit. “While you’re here you can help me with some cases. B doesn’t want metas patrolling Gotham, but you can help me do detective work in the Cave.”

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Bart said. “You can call me the Impulsive Detective.”

“Sure thing,” Tim said.

They spent the rest of the night working on a cold case from two years ago. Bart wasn’t good at making theories, but he compiled data so fast the computer had trouble keeping up. It was the best cap to the day ever. Tim was so happy, especially when they made a breakthrough on a serial killer case from the eighties.

The only thing that would’ve made it better if the rest of Young Justice had been there to help. But that was a fool’s wish.

Tim shut out the stab of unhappiness he got when remembering the rodeo. The friendship ship had sailed. There was no use moping over it. . . But he found himself looking up to tell Kon or Cassie something, only to be greeted with an empty cave and the one friend who stuck with him.

It shouldn’t have felt lonely. Dragons didn’t need friends.

And yet, Tim still wished, belatedly, that he had them anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Ivy, sitting at the bar, crying over her drink: It’s not fair. Why are women so beautiful? I didn’t ask for this. I was supposed to be a plant mom, not pine over the Aphrodites of the world. Lesbian bartender: Preach it, sister. I feel you, heart and soul. Don’t worry, we’ll find you a nice chick here and everything will be better.

Ivy: No it won't. Love is a lie and happiness is a fraud. Just leave me here to die. *continues crying*

Meanwhile, in Mount Justice.

Cassie: Okay, so we've spend literal days wallowing and still have no clue how to apologize to Robin properly. Admit it guys, we're idiots.
Slobo: No duh.
Anita: It's just a lot of pressure. We really messed up.
Cissie: I miss Robin. He was the only one who understood how ranged attacks affect things. Also, has anyone seen Impulse since he threw those goons into the speedforce?
General shaking of heads
Greta: Impulse has probably abandoned us as well, though I don't blame him. The guilt is killing me a second time. I can't go on. T-T
Kon: … I have an idea.
Everyone: Oh no.
Kon: Hey! Give me some credit. I'm capable of scheming to. Now listen, here's what we do . . .

Friendship is (Red) Bull

Chapter Summary

Steph becomes vengeance, Tim is NOT sulking, and Tam introduces him to a new best friend.

Chapter Notes

Me last chapter: I'll add a throwaway line about Kon's friendship plans.

Everybody in the comments: This will end in flames and disaster. We want this.

Me: Well, this is awkward. i didn't actually have a plan---

And then inspiration struck my like a bowling ball to the head, so Kon DOES have a plan. Enjoy Young Justice's foray into schemey schemes. 😅

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weekend ended without fanfare. Ivy was still on the loose, Bart was dragged back to Alabama by an exasperated Max Mercury, and Steph began her campaign to terrorize the Waynes.

What was weird was Young Justice. They were texting Tim nonstop to say sorry even though he didn't want their apologies. Talking about feelings would just make things worse. Weirdos.

"*If you don't let us make it up to you soon, we'll MAKE you,*" Superboy's last message said in a pathetic attempt to seem threatening.

Tim finally had enough. He sent back a hundred angry frowns and blocked their numbers. *Nobody* made him do anything . . . Except Jack, Babs, and Cass, but that was different. Kon needed to check himself.

Also, what gives? They spend the last several months ignoring him, but *now* they wanted to socialize? Pick one!

Tim slouched on the library couch and chewed on his shirt collar. The fabric smoked slightly. Luckily, it was just one of Bruce's old band T-shirts signed by the lead singer, so Tim didn't care if it got destroyed.

"Dick, I'm lodging a complaint with the Human Association," he said.

Dick didn't look up from his phone. "Yeah?"

"Yup. Your socialization mind games are asinine."

"That's great, Timmy."

Tim glared. Dick was sprawled next to him, texting Babs like he had been *all day* even though Tim was right there. The two of them were freaking out over the latest plot twist in the telenovela they were binging. Bad hoard member. The least Dick could do was pay attention to Tim's woes.

"Nobody understands my pain," Tim said. "I'm surrounded by horrible, unappreciative humans."

"Mm hmm, sure thing, bud," Dick said, glued to his phone.

He threw himself onto the cushions with Jason-esque melodrama. Dragons were way easier to understand; hoard, mates, enemies, that was it. There were no "friends" to complicate things.

Not that dragons mated often. Finding a mate meant finding a dragon you trusted not to tear your throat out and steal your hoard, hence why it was so rare. Janet was the exception, not the rule. Besides, she cheated and married Jack, who was the least threatening human Tim ever met. So, technically, she wasn't a traditionally mated dragon either.

Tim didn't think he was going to mate. At least, he didn't want to. He wasn't ready for that level of commitment. As magical as complete trust was, he'd seen what it did to Janet. She hid it well, but she was a sap for Jack. *Yuck.*

Tim threw a tic tac at Dick, which finally got him to look up.

"Sorry," Dick said, at least having the decency to mean it. "Dr. Montegomery just got out of his coma, but Isabella married her dentist, so it's pretty tense."

"It'd be less tense if the doctor killed the dentist to win her back," Tim said. "Anyway, as I was saying, you're the worst."

"Rats, and here I was hoping to get ahead of Jason in the hoard rankings," Dick said, putting his phone away. "What's bothering you?"

Tim glanced around the room, just to make sure there were no prying ears. "Young Justice is being weird."

"What?" Dick looked blindsided.

Tim slouched even more, letting himself become one with the couch. "Jason was right. They don't think we're friends."

He gave Dick a rundown of what happened at the rodeo. He'd been sparse about it on Friday since Steph was on a war path, so none of the Bats had the deets.

"Oh, ouch," Dick said when Tim finished. "That sucks."

Tim nodded. Dick had been proved wrong by Jason before. He understood how humiliating this was.

“Now they’re trying to talk to me about feelings, and it’s the worst,” Tim said. “It doesn’t make sense, and I’m sick of worrying about this. I never should’ve given it the old, human try.”

Dick put his phone away and sat by Tim, hauling him onto his lap. “Hey, don’t say that. You did your best, and it sounds like there’s hope. I know feelings aren’t your jam, but they’re reaching out to you. That’s got to mean something.”

“It *means* they want to vent about me to my face without feeling guilty,” Tim said. “Some people did that to me in elementary school and spent an hour telling me I was a freak. I’m not interested in doing that again. Hard pass.”

Granted, Tim had assaulted two kids in a game of tag, stalked one down the halls during breaks for fun, and stared unblinkingly at several others during class for a month straight. It’d been a way to play with his food without actually eating them.

But getting called into the principal’s office to talk about his behavior—and being told in increasingly not-nice ways that he was a freak by the kids’ parents—was much less fun. The principal—who Tim had a *rocky* relationship with—had to step in and get the Karens to shut up.

Saved by one of the Jail Wardens. How pitiful. Tim had to be much more careful about terrorizing his peers after that.

“Tim, you never told me about this,” Dick said, sounding horrified. “I’m so sorry you went through that.”

“It’s fine. Plus, it was ages ago, I’m not upset,” Tim said. “This Young Justice stuff is just a reminder that I don’t need friends.”

This was just his human DNA being weird anyway. He wouldn’t let it define his actions again. From now on, no friends. Only hoard.

“Tim, there are five empty Ben & Jerry’s cartons on the floor that say otherwise.”

“That’s just a craving,” Tim said. “Stop psycho-analyzing my food. It didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Okay,” Dick said, scratching Tim’s head. “But if it helps, I think you should give Young Justice one last chance. I know it’s once bitten, twice shy, but they seemed like good kids. Maybe they’ll surprise you.”

Tim huffed. “I wasn’t *bitten.* Anyway, you should be more concerned about yourself. Has Steph gotten her revenge yet?”

Dick grimaced. “No, the silence scares me.”

“It should,” Tim said.

So far, Steph had rigged Jason’s helmet to talk in a Spongebob voice, spray-painted Bruce’s batsuit with rainbow glitter, and hidden a dozen alarm clocks in Bab’s apartment to go off randomly throughout the night. Her pettiness was something to be feared, and she had *plans* for Dick.

“You’ve infected us with your obliviousness ray,” Dick said. “I swear my common sense has vanished since you became Robin.”

“Bold of you to assume you had any to begin with,” Tim said. He stuffed another handful of tic tacs into his mouth.

Dick cocked his head and shrugged. “You know what, fair enough.”

***

Prepare for revenge, Tim, was the first text he got on Monday morning.

Tim squinted at it, willing the letters to make sense in his brain. It took five minutes before his consciousness booted up and he remembered to look at the sender. It was from Steph, not Young Justice, which made a lot more sense.

Who is the target today? He asked. Steph was making him be her not-so-beautiful-assistant for vengeance, and Tim didn't have enough mercy in his body to spare his hoard her wrath.

Cass, Steph said.

Tim paused to stare at his phone.

Spoy, no, he texted. *It won't work. You can't beat Cass.*

Even if you won the battle, you lost the war. She was unconquerable *and* unprankable.

Bold words for a minion, Steph said. *Bow down to your overlord and do as I say, scaly boi.*

"And people say I'm insane," he muttered, pocketing his phone. "Don't come crying to me when this backfires on you, Steph."

He'd help her out of loyalty, but there was no way this would end well. RIP Spoiler, she was one of the best.

Alfred knocked on the door and told Tim to get ready for school.

Tim got grudgingly to his feet and threw his uniform on, then headed downstairs to grab a cup of coffee.

If Steph insisted on facing the final boss of the Waynes today, he was going to need all the caffeine he could get.

***

Tim slept through the first half of his classes and terrorized his peers during the second. There was a register he could growl at that was inaudible to human ears, but made the hair stand up on the back of their necks and their hearts beat like drums. They could sense there was a predator in their midst, and Tim liked watching them squirm and break out into cold sweat. It was the only interesting thing to do in Social Studies.

After lunch, one of Tim's teachers passed out a paper to write their future plans—one of those "what do you want to be when you grow up?" things, even though most of the kids in the class were rich enough not to care.

The teacher smiled and told them to be honest because this was a safe space, so Tim wrote "high school dropout," "ruler of the universe," and "professional ratcatcher." It never hurt to dream big.

He heard the teacher muttering about another parent-teacher conference on his way out, but ignored her. There was only a month before summer vacation. It'd be child's play to put the semiannual "put this kid into after-school therapy" talk until next semester.

Though it'd be fun to say hi to the principal again. Tim had been too well-behaved the last couple of years. He didn't want the school to get complacent.

He paused by the front gates when an odd sensation crawled up his skin.

The feeling of being watched.

He stared at the building across from Gotham Academy with suspicion. The glare on the windows was too strong, so he couldn't see through the glass, but he swore there was someone waving at him.

His scaly senses were tingling. One didn't avidly stalk criminals and vigilantes during their formative years without picking up an innate stalker-radar. A stalk-dar. Yeah, that sounded cool.

But who'd be watching Tim Drake?

“Busy day, master Tim?” Alfred said when Tim slipped into the back seat, mulling over whether a rogue cracked his identity. Cass was in shotgun, feet on the dash and giant sunglasses on her face.

“Nope,” Tim said, grabbed the coffee left for him in the cup holder. Decaf, ugh. “There’s literally nothing interesting about high school.”

“Should homeschool, like me,” Cass said.

“I wish,” Tim said with feeling.

“Unfortunately, master Timothy is required to interact with humans by his father,” Alfred told Cass as they drove away from Human Child Jail. “It may seem extreme, but given his lack of retention for basic social cues, I believe it’s a necessary evil to keep him adapted to living among humans.”

“Oh,” Cass nodded with way too much understanding. “Timmy dumb.”

Tim scowled. Why was he hoarding her again?

“Teenagers barely count as humans,” Tim grumbled, sinking into his seat. “I’m not dumb, the world is.”

Cass reached back and patted his knee. “Don’t worry, little brother. Your life is funny joke.”

They got onto the main road and headed to the dance studio. Tim glared at Cass for all of five minutes, but couldn’t stay mad at her. She was too gleeful to be anything but endearing, even if her entertainment of choice was to watch people suffer.

***

Dance was fun, but ballet was Tim’s Waterloo.

He was good at it. Dick's flexibility training and Tim's noodle-impersonation helped him get the forms down easily. The problem lay in that Tim was overbooked with his internship, personal projects, claim on Gotham, school, and vigilante life. He couldn't balance as many dance lessons as Cass and was falling behind.

It didn't help that ballet was Cass' favorite. She put in so many hours that Tim couldn't keep up. The teachers loved her, and he suspected it was only a matter of time before Cass was scouted for a team.

Even worse, Charlotte did ballet. She was supplanting Tim as Cass' favorite Dance Minion. It was the epitome of unfair.

By the time class was over, Tim was aching all over and burning with jealousy.

The only bright side to the whole thing that Steph was too.

Tim had texted her as soon as warm-ups ended to tell her that Cass was going to hang out with Charlotte the rest of the day, so Steph would need to hold off on vengeance.

But my plans! Tell Cass to stop making friends everywhere. It 's not fair. Was Steph's reply. There were a lot of fire emojis and roaring dinosaurs.

Tim reminded her that life was an unfair, cold, cruel world, and turned off his phone. Steph would get over it. Tim would bet money that she'd just change gears and put bleach in Dick's shampoo instead. She'd been planning to add hair dye to his conditioner too.

The tabloids were going to love that.

"Did you have a good lesson, master Tim?" Alfred asked when Tim stumbled, half-dead, out of the studio. Cass stayed behind to do more choreography with the advanced students. She'd be there until seven, then do an hour of hip hop before starting patrol around nine thirty.

“Nope,” Tim said, blinking heavily. Jealousy made him sleepy. “Can we go home so I can take a nap before patrol?”

Alfred steadied Tim with his arm and helped him into the car. Tim’s legs felt like Jell-O in an earthquake.

“I’m afraid that’s not in the cards today,” Alfred said as he drove *away* from Bristol, weaving through traffic like it wasn’t there. “Master Bruce requested your presence at WE. There are some reports he wants your opinion on. It’s an excellent learning opportunity.”

Tim groaned and rolled off the backseat onto the floor. The seatbelt tangled in his leg and cut off his circulation. “It’s going to be more policy evaluations, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea,” Alfred said. “You’ll have to discover that yourself.”

“No! Alfred, turn around,” Tim said. Buildings rolled by in the window, bringing him closer to his doom. “Bruce is just sulking because Jason killed another gang leader yesterday. He *always* makes me review paperwork when that happens. I’m being punished for another’s actions.”

Bruce and Jason had another shouting match about the ethics of killing in the cave last night, and the spray bottle had been used. Now Jason was on another one of his angsty “I’m not a Wayne” benders and even *more* pro-murder just to spite his dad.

Because of that, Bruce was in one of *his* spirals. Namely, the delusion that his kids were drifting away from him and the only way to keep them close was to use evil internships to force them to hang out him.

Tim didn’t mind extra hoard time with his favorite human, but if Bruce was giving him extra documents just to keep him in grabbing range, he’d throw himself into Gotham bay and let the piranhas chew on him.

“There, there,” Alfred said. “Your suffering shan’t be in vain. I’m making a stop at the Daily Roast before dropping you off.”

Tim scrambled back into his seat as they went through a roundabout. “Seriously?”

“As long as you promise to behave at the office, I see no harm in indulging your fascination with coffee just this once,” Alfred said.

Tim cheered so loud that the car next to them thought Alfred was honking.

“There will be a limit on espresso shots, however,” Alfred said ruefully as he rubbed his ear. “Do keep it down in the vehicle, master Tim. I’d like to keep what precious little hearing I have left.”

“Sure, sure, just get me to caffeine land. I need a 32oz special with extra sugar and tons of cream.” Tim said, draping himself over the back of the passenger seat.

Alfred had been monitoring Tim’s coffee intake zealously. Any chance to have extra Beans of the Gods was worth paperwork. Tim would gladly look over all the documents for Bruce if it got him more.

***

Give an employee a paycheck and they did the bare minimum. Give a dragon coffee and they were a production powerhouse.

He was crammed in the corner by the break room, up to his elbows in documents. The desk next to him was empty, but several interns were doing busy work nearby. A couple made eye contact with Tim, paled, and looked back down. They could probably sense all the coffee in his bloodstream.

Tim wasn’t confined by the laws of time anymore. He was soaring on the wings of caffeine, and they were taking him to *freedom.* He annotated meeting minutes almost as fast as Bart ate tacos, and was halfway through the project summary for Bruce's green energy initiative that R&D put together. He’d be home in no time, and able to get out his Bunsen burner and brew more coffee in the attic. Alfred wouldn’t find out. Tim was the *god* of coffee. He could do all things through the beans that strengthened him.

He made it another three pages before he got distracted by yelling.

Tim paused and peeked over the papers, but didn't see anything amiss.

The yelling got louder. Tim pricked his ears and—oh, yeah, it was Tam and Lucius having another argument in Lucius' office.

Great.

"—not staying all the way until August," Tam was saying. The interns probably couldn't hear her clearly, but Tim's ears were sharp. "I've done everything you wanted. Let me quit."

Lucius said something about responsibility and consequences and—the neighbor's mailbox? Tim might need to get his ears cleaned. That last part didn't make sense.

A few minutes later, Tam stormed out of Lucius' office and threw herself onto the seat by Tim. Her hair was wild and her eyes slightly red. She pressed her face into her handbag and screamed.

The other interns were now studiously avoiding looking in her and Tim's direction. Smart move.

Tim sat frozen, remembering the documentary he'd watched about T-rexes. If he didn't move, maybe Tam wouldn't see him.

She started to sniffle. Tim felt his heart skip a beat in horror.

"Um," he said, putting down the document. "Tam? What's wrong?"

"None of your business," she snapped. "Go back to crunching numbers like a good lemming and let me wallow."

Tim would be happy to do just that, but . . . “You’re crying.”

Even coffee couldn’t cancel out the damage he took from people getting emotional around him. Either Tim fled or Tam pulled herself together, and Tim didn’t want to leave. He’d finally gotten his seat warm.

“Dad’s just being an ass again,” Tam said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “He’s making me go to full-time through the summer. Forget a vacation, I’m barely going to have time to hang out with my friends.”

“Oh, that sucks,” Tim said, genuinely bummed. “Bruce likes to mess with my schedule too. Anything I can do to help?”

The plight of overworked, underpaid interns was everywhere.

Tam snorted. “No, not unless . . . What are you reading?”

Tim looked down at his pile of documents. There were coffee stains on most of them. “Just some stuff for Bruce. There’s an initiative for the—”

“—Green energy thing,” Tam said, tears drying up instantly. “Dad was talking about it. He and Bruce are going to review it together.”

There was a glint in her eyes that sent a shiver down Tim’s spine. It was worse than when he'd noticed himself being watched today.

Tim felt as if he were being hunted, but that was insane. The only time he felt like this was when Janet was in town. Tam was human . . . right? She smelled human, but most humans didn’t channel that much hostile energy over random paperwork.

“You know, Tim, I think there’s something you can do after all,” Tam said in a silky smooth voice.

She pulled a Red Bull out of her bag and dumped the contents into his cup of coffee.

“Hey, that’s my stuff!” Tim said, grabbing his poor, defiled drink. “Tam, what’s the matter with you?”

This was his special treat. He was savoring it. It was more important than the sanctity of life.

She sat back and crossed her arms. “I’m helping you out. You want an energy boost, right? This works better than coffee. You’ll love it.”

“That’s not the point,” Tim said. He wasn’t whining. He was complaining in a justifiably high-pitched manner over the war crimes being committed on his innocent beverage. “You’ll ruin the flavor. I worked hard to get the combo just—oh, wait, this is good.”

He’d taken a sip on reflex (the coffee cup was in his hand, what else was he supposed to do?) and wow, it was like drinking car exhaust. He liked.

Tim forgot what he was talking about and took another drink. Then another. And another. His heart started to pound. He could hear the blood sloshing around his body. The world blurred into a mix of foggy outlines and crystal-cut detail.

“This is *awesome,”* Tim whispered, rage replaced with tastiness. “Tam, you’re the best.”

“I know,” she purred. “Now, why don’t you finish reading that report, then go tell my dad all about it. I’m sure he’s dying to hear your opinions.”

“Yeah, sure. Read paper, go to Lucius. Coffee.” There was only half the cup left. Tim would need to ration it, except he wanted all of it *now.* Choices, choices.

He chose to go big or go home.

When he ran out of Miracle Potion seconds later, he stared at the empty styrofoam cup in despair. It wasn't allowed to run out. He paid for this. Where was the loyalty?

Tam handed him another Red Bull and smiled like an angel about to punt a Cherubim straight into Hell. Tim *never* saw Tam smile. He'd thought she was allergic to it, but he had to say, the sharpness of her grin was a good look on her.

"Better watch out, or I'll keep you," he said.

Anyone who gave him caffeine was prime hoard material. Too bad he was swearing off new humans. He'd learned that was a bad idea after Young Justice. But gosh darn it if Tam didn't tempt him to change his mind.

"Less talk, more substance abuse," Tam said, snapping her fingers. "If Dad's keeping me here I'm going to make him as miserable as me, and *you're* going to help."

"Cool, cool, cool," Tim said. He cracked open the second Red Bull and noticed his hands were shaking. Excellent. That meant it was working.

Did Tam have anymore cans in her purse? He'd have to ask. Two cans off energy drink wasn't nearly enough. He needed more.

He needed *all of it.*

Chapter End Notes

Tim bursts into Lucius' office twenty minutes later with an even worse caffeine high than Impulse several chapters ago, and locks the door behind him. Lucius is trapped with a hyperactive teenager that doesn't know what "no," "it's quitting time," or "I have a family" mean. It takes calling Bruce to pry Tim out of the room for Lucius to escape an hour later.

All according to Tam's plan.

Meanwhile, Young Justice.

Kon: Phase one is done. Robin is in Gotham, so we can make the rest of the arrangements. Excellent work spying on him, Impulse.
Bart: Please, use my code name.
Kon: *sigh* Alright, excellent work, Judas.
Bart: I'm a good traitor, but only because you promised to be nice to Robin from now on. Now, give me my money.
Cissie: Money? You wanted snacks!
Bart: There's a difference?
Anita: Here. Five pounds of Fruit By the Foot and Gummy Bears, as promised. You really did us a solid, Imp.
Bart: Don't thank me. Rob totally knew I was there. I waved at him. You'll have to be extra sneaky if you want the rest of your plan to go off without a hitch.
Cissie: . . . I don't know if we can do sneaky. Can you help us again?
Bart: I dunno.
Greta: We can get you more candy.
Bart: Okay! I like treachery. It pays way better than justice.

Meanwhile, in Alabama.

Max: Strange, the Bart-proof safe is still locked, and he didn't eat the rest of the baking sugar, so why are my junk food senses activating?

Get In Loser, We're Going Stalking

Chapter Summary

Tim acts emotionally mature for thirty seconds. Naturally, the universe overcorrects to fix this break in the matrix.

Chapter Notes

I swore I just updated this, but it's been like a week. How did that happen? Sorry guys!

On another note, please yell at me to finish the Jack/Janet prequel I've been slaving over for a month. I'm so close to finishing it, but Life keeping stopping me from finding a way. T-T

Pour one out for Ravengranger as well. She's been super awesome helping me with another project, so she hasn't had time to beta Happy Families. We miss you, Raven!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim was being stalked. The signs were everywhere.

Footprints in Alfred’s flowerbeds.

Goosebumps on his arms when he was on patrol.

The inexplicable need to assert dominance with extreme, unadulterated violence.

The list went on. Tim’s sixth sense for danger was in overdrive. He was genetically disposed to responding with violence whenever he felt threatened, so now he was borderline lethal on patrol.

“One more slip and we’re revisiting the Three Rules,” Bruce said after Tim nearly ripped a man’s ankle off.

“It was an oopsie,” Tim said. “My bad.”

He'd started to shift his muscles out of habit, but forgot that dragons had stronger grip strength than people. It was a rookie mistake. Luckily, the drug dealer he’d been holding upside down over Gotham Bay would be fine. It was just a sprain.

Bruce still put a red X on Tim’s “Good Vigilante” chart. Tim was insulted that thing even existed. It was humiliating. Note to self, burn it as soon as they got back to the cave.

To get away from Bruce’s tired sighs, Tim spent the rest of patrol with Steph and Cass.

Normally, the two of them were a well-oiled machine of chaos. Now, their dynamic was a Looney-Tunes rivalry, with Steph as Elmer Fudd.

Steph’s revenge was failing spectacularly, just like Tim warned her it would. One-upping Cass was impossible; she wasn’t embarrassed by anything and got a sick amount of joy messing with people. Going up against Cass was like soloing the final boss of a video game as a level one villager.

But Steph—who was willing to fight God at 2 a.m. in a Denny’s parking lot—hadn’t listened to Tim, so she was suffering.

So far, she’d tried to sabotage Cass’s suit, spray paint her hair purple, and gave her the cold shoulder by not inviting her to cake tastings and karaoke nights.

Coincidentally, Tim was getting dragged to all those events, since Steph only had two friends. The idea was to make Cass jealous so she’d apologize for gaslighting Steph.

Unfortunately, it backfired, because Cass had other friends besides Tim and Steph.

“It’s not fair,” Steph hissed as she and Tim grappled across the Gotham skyline. Cass darted ahead of them, doing lazy cartwheels on the edge of a roof, the picture of smugness. “I know she’s practically perfect in every way, but this is too much. She’s a social butterfly. At this rate, she’ll never say sorry.”

Tim patted his favorite gargoyle as he landed on a bank roof. “I told you not to play with fire. Unlike me, you’ll get burned.”

“Shut it, scaly boy,” Steph said, landing next to him. “I thought she just had a couple dance friends, not a ride-or-die BFF on steroids.”

“Yeah, Charlotte’s really buff,” Tim said, thinking about Cass’ ballet buddy. “Her thighs are thicker than Jason’s.”

Charlotte was a 5’11,” half-Scandinavian athlete with arms as thick as tree trunks and hair like spun gold. She also smelled familiar in a way that made Tim’s hackles rise. Whenever he ran into her, he wanted to bite her, and not just out of jealousy.

“It’s not fair!” Steph said, pulling up her mask to pout. “I want muscles like that. She’s a goddess and I’m a lowly worm.”

“You’re a professional vigilante,” Tim reminded her.

“A worm in a suit,” Steph said, slumping against the gargoyle in despair.

Tim hummed in consolation. He didn’t have many enemies, but Charlotte made the list. Anyone who got between him and his attic gremlin needed to go. Alas, Cass adored her, so murder wasn’t an option. Neither was kidnapping and relocating her to Florida. It was so unfair.

“Maybe you and Cass should call a truce,” Tim said. He spotted an alley cat on the street corner and prepped his grapple. “Apologies are dumb anyway.”

“She’s a lying, manipulative, gaslighting traitor,” Steph grumbled. She glared at Cass, who waved back from her rooftop unrepentantly. “I want her to suffer.”

Tim gave Steph his most Alfred-worthy glare. “Hate to break it to you, Spoy, but you’re also all of those adjectives.”

Steph drew a mustache on the gargoyle with a tube of lipstick. “I feel attacked.”

“And I’m frustrated,” Tim said. “Drama isn’t allowed in my hoard. Just make up already, otherwise I’ll lock you both in the panic room.”

They could sweat out their emotions on their own. Leave Tim out of it. He’d already suffered enough.

“You’re intervening?” Steph said. *“You?”*

“Yeah,” Tim said. “Go throw some waffles at her and call it even, otherwise I won’t patrol with either of you.”

It’d break his heart, but sometimes a dragon gotta do what it gotta do to survive in this crazy, crazy world.

Steph yanked her cowl back on. “Fine, *Mom.* Geez.”

“You’ll thank me when you’re older,” Tim drawled. “Now, I’m getting a midnight snack. Talk to you when you’re besties with your besty again.”

He fired the grapple and dove off the roof. The air caressed him on the way down, brushing his hair like silk.

“Some ally you are,” Steph yelled. “I hope you choke on a pigeon!”

He hissed in amusement and landed on a dumpster. She severely underestimated what he could swallow in one gulp.

Steph grumbled to herself for a couple more minutes, then sprinted toward Cass.

Black Bat clapped her hands and ran away, thus beginning a merry chase. Either they'd be best friends again in an hour or things would be one hundred times worse. Either way, it wasn't Tim's problem.

He shook out his cape and stalked toward the mouth of the alley where the cat was grooming itself. It was a posh calico with a collar on it.

One of Catwoman's strays.

Jackpot.

Selina's cats were the best—pampered, well-fed, but aggressive enough to put up a fight.

Bruce had given up on monitoring Tim's street food, so anything wandering outside was fair game. Normally, collared animals were a no-go, but since Catwoman had been out of the country since Tim became Robin, it wasn't like she could *stop* him.

Fancy Feast on legs, here he came.

***

Forty-five minutes later, Steph commed Tim to tell him that Cass' terrible insincere apology had been accepted on the alter of Spoiler's ire, and they were now joined at the hip again.

“Congrats,” Tim said when he met back up with them near the Bowery. “Your fight was driving me crazy.”

“Not a fight,” Cass said. “Game. I won.”

Steph punched her arm. “Keep that up, and I won’t give you that friendship bracelet I was making before this.”

“Oh no,” Cass said, deadpan. “Evil.”

Black Bat was covered head to toe, but she oozed smugness. Tim felt weirdly proud. Cass was so comfortable around them now. She was a far-cry from the shy girl he’d found in the attic a year ago.

His happiness cut off quickly, however, as a familiar, prickly feeling made the hair on his arms stand up.

He growled, scanning the cityscape for anything out of place.

“What’s wrong?” Cass asked.

“Someone’s watching us,” Tim said. “This is annoying.”

He couldn’t even spent time with his hoard without someone harassing him. Was nothing sacred? This better be another dragon, because *Tim* was the one who was supposed to stalk people. It wasn’t meant to be the other way around.

“Ew, creepy, do you know who?” Steph said, narrowing her eyes.

“No, I’ll need to do recon tomorrow,” Tim said, rubbing his arms. “I keep putting it off.”

He'd meant to do it days ago, but after Tam gave him the Magic Super Juice things got blurry. Bruce and Alfred got haunted looks in their eyes when he asked about what happened during his caffeine high, so he was still piecing together what went down.

Apparently, there *was* a limit to how much caffeine he could have. Good to know.

He'd work on building a better tolerance this summer, *after* getting rid of his stalker.

. . . Though, to be fair, he'd tried. He'd even asked Bart if he could put on his Impulsive Detective hat for a few minutes. Two sets of eyes were better than one, after all. But the guy just said "I'm a traitor!" and hung up with a cackle.

Weird. Normally, Bart loved an excuse to hang out. The delicate machinations of his mind were impossible to untangle. What a silly little guy.

"Come on," Cass said, tugging Tim out of his thoughts. "Will lose them. Know a place."

"Sounds good to me," Steph said. "Last thing we need is for Robin to become Jason the Sequel."

"No booms," Cass said with a nod, then pushed them off the building.

Tim and Steph got their grapples out with much practice and many grumbles.

"Follow the leader," Cass said, quickly overtaking them.

"You're not our overlord!" Steph said.

Cass just cackled. Of course, she did. They were but minions to her eyes, and it showed. At times like these, it was hard to tell who was hoarding who.

If she weren't so sentimental and feeling oriented, Cass would have made a good dragon.

***

Twenty minutes of treating Gotham like a jungle gym later, and Tim felt the prickly sensation go away. They'd lost their stalkers.

Even better, they'd lost them in Crime Alley, which meant Tim had an excuse to visit his favorite zombie.

"Back! Back, shoo!" Jason said, waving at them with a broom. "You're not allowed here. Get out before I zap you."

Tim ducked the broom handle and hissed. "Stop resisting, we just want to kidnap you a little."

Cass held up the taser she pick-pocketed from Hood and turned it on and off. An arch of electricity danced between the prongs. "Fun for whole family, ages three and up."

"That is *not* an age appropriate toy." Jason stood protectively in front of his trembling goons, who he'd been having a meeting with before Tim, Steph, and Cass crashed it. "Do not make me call your Batdad."

"He's not my dad. Besides, you hate talking with the B-man," Steph said, holding a lighter and can of hairspray at the ready. "Come on, Hood, live a little. We have plans for the Alley tonight. Plans you could be a part of if you weren't such a stick in the mud."

"Join us, Hood," Tim said, cocking his head to the side. "It's fun."

One of the goons squeaked in alarm. It took Tim a moment to remember he'd twisted his neck too far. It was almost sideways. Oops.

“No, I’m on the clock. Go bother a different gang leader,” Jason said, reaching for his belt. “I can’t believe this. A full-time job killing traffickers and rapists, and *you lot* are still more work for me to manage.”

“Sound like Nightwing,” Cass said. “Boring old man.”

“That’s it,” Jason snapped, “no more mister nice guy!”

Instead of a gun, he pulled out a spray bottle and systematically beat them back with it and the broom. Tim jumped behind Steph to avoid a nasty squirt, but got tripped by Cass as she jumped off his shoulders and back into the rafters. Traitor.

“You suck,” Steph said to Jason before pulling out her grapple. “Batman’s more fun than you!”

Jason threw the entire broom at her, but Steph dodged and grappled into the rafters. She gave him the finger, then vanished out the skylight with Cass.

Tim didn’t waste time with his grapple. He hooked his claws into the wall and climbed it like a lizard, hissing at Jason before scuttling into the nearest vent. His whispered swears in draconic echoed off the metal.

They’d just wanted to borrow Jason for a few hours to light some rotten barrels on fire, but noooo, he had to be adulty and lame.

Stupid Red Hood. Pulling out the spray bottle was *rude.*

***

“So, now what do we do?” Tim said as he wrung out his cape.

The three of them stood on the edge of Robinson Park. Normally, they’d return to their patrol routes, but patrol had finished an hour ago. They were just too stubborn to call it a night.

“Denny’s?” Cass said, head cocked.

“How dare you,” Steph said. “We worship Waffle House in this family. We don’t partake of its natural enemy.”

“I do.” Cass lifted up her cowl to pop a piece of bubble gum into her mouth. “Charlotte likes Denny’s.”

“Don’t say her name in front of me,” Steph said, throwing her hands over her face. “My self-esteem can’t take it.”

Cass cackled, like the menace she was.

They settled on ice cream at a 24-hour soft serve place. It was close enough to walk instead of grapple, so they could talk while they headed over there.

Cass and Steph chatted as they moseyed down the street, but Tim paused as his phone vibrated.

His *civilian* phone.

Tim only had his hoard’s numbers on it, but the Waynes didn’t text him at night, since comms were a thing. Intrigued, Tim stopped to open the message.

Hi Robin! This is Gretaa. Brt hlpng m type. I have a phone nwo!

“Huh,” Tim said. “That’s cool.”

If Greta had a phone, did that make it a Secret phone? Dick would love that play on words.

But why was Greta texting *him?*

Okkaee, Grtea says time to start (Tsih is Bart) in 10 . . . 9 . . .8

A few more numbers came through, counting down. Half of them were typos, so Bart had to send them again.

What in the Waffle House?

“Rob, come on,” Steph said from across the street. “Quit dawdling.”

Tim looked up. He’d stopped on the corner of the sidewalk, staring at his phone like an idiot.

“Sorry,” Tim said. He took a step forward.

4

A loud screech echoed off the buildings a couple streets over. Tim almost dropped his phone at the sudden noise. The screen flashed as a new text came in.

3

Tim, Steph, and Cass jumped back as a white van did a hairpin turn around the corner, burning rubber like a chain smoker did cigarettes.

Random details jumped out: old tires, no license plates, a beanie baby on the dash.

2

Tim dropped his phone and reached for his batarangs as the car screeched to a stop in front of him and the side door flew open.

1

He braced for mobsters, traffickers, or lost tourists. Nothing prepared him for a red blur to appear out of nowhere and shove a smelly cloth into his face.

“What the—” Tim coughed, trying to get free.

But it was too late. His vision swam as sudden dizziness took over.

The last thing he was aware of was being flung into the mysterious white van by the red blur while Steph and Cass yelled in the background while the van (which was full of weirdly dressed people in ski masks) yelled at the driver to step on it.

Then it all went black.

***

He woke up with a splitting headache and a craving for seafood. It took a few seconds to remember he wasn’t in the med bay after an accident on patrol, or curled up in his room licking his wounds after fighting with his mother.

This was a kidnapping, which was bad . . . Probably.

On a scale of one to ten, Tim wasn’t sure if being abducted was more or less dangerous than his day-to-day life.

The floor vibrated under him, so he figured he was still in the car. It smelled like gasoline, teenagers, and dirty carpet. Tim wished he was still unconscious.

The van went over a pothole and flung him against the back of a chair. Tim groaned as his head pounded like a drum soloist at a metal concert.

“Guys, he’s awake!”

Ah, beans.

Tim cracked his eyes open and pinned his captors with his best Bat-glare.

Stern displeasure turned into flabbergasted shock when he got a good look at the *idiots* who’d grabbed him.

“Kon?” Tim said, sitting up as straight as he could. “Cassie?!”

He tried to rub his eyes, but his hands were tied behind him with zip-ties.

Young Justice was crammed in the back of the van, no seat belts to be seen as the junker they were in careened down narrow Gotham streets. They were all there except Slobo.

Anita and Cissie’s hair was tangled together as they tried to brace themselves against the sharp turns, Cassie was dressed in a black wig and glasses for a disguise, Bart was in the passenger seat eating a giant pixie stix, Secret was blinking in and out of visible range with a disturbing grin on her face, and for some ungodly reason *Kon was driving.*

“Left, left!” Anita screamed. “Do you even know what you’re doing?!”

Kon jerked the wheel and narrowly avoided a stop sign. “Of course not. I don’t have a license—Oh, hey, Robin, any tips for driving a manual?”

"*Look at the road!"* half the car screamed.

Tim pressed his face back against the floor, head pounding.

Yeah, he really wished he was still unconscious. Whatever time of day it was, it was too early for this.

***

Steph and Cass were on Young Justice's heels. Tim figured *that* out because this fellow teens were screaming about demon eggplants and gender-bent Batmen trying to slash the car's tires with throwing stars.

They would've gotten away with it too, if Greta hadn't clapped her hands, created a swirling vortex of unearthly fog, and teleported the van into a pocket dimension full of the screams of the tortured dead.

After a few seconds of harrowing, multidimensional terror, the van skidded back into the mortal realm and nearly tipped over when it came to a stop.

It righted itself at the last second. A few moments of tense silence passed. Kon gripped the steering wheel so hard it broke, Cissie clung to Anita as she hyperventilated, and Cassie looked ready to cry.

Bart kept eating his pixie stix, and Greta cheered.

"I told you I could do it!" she beamed. "Teleportation successful. That was *awesome!"*

"S-Sure Secret, whatever you say," Cissie said, looking at the ghost-girl with new fear.

Tim mentally readjusted Greta's threat-level. Anyone who could walk in and out of the dead dimension and smile like it was just another day frolicking through a meadow was serious business.

But right now there were more important things to worry about than Greta's new portal-abilities.

Tim inched upright again, blinking stars out of his eyes. "Is anyone going to tell me what's going on?"

The rest of the car looked back at him, like they'd just remembered he was there.

"Holy abduction, Batman," Anita said. "It worked."

"I told you it would," Kon said, preening. "And you said we were destined to fail."

Tim closed his eyes and counted to ten. It was a technique Jack used a lot when Tim was a kid. He had a lot of sympathy for his Dad right now. People's "bright ideas" *were* headache inducing. Who knew? Usually Tim was the only one who had those. He'd never been on this side of the equation before.

"You guys planned my kidnapping?" He said slowly.

"Yup!" Bart said, opening a Reese's. "I helped. I'm a good traitor."

Tim kicked the back of Bart's chair. "No, you're a bad friend. Evil speedster! Best friend status revoked. Give me my Tamagotchi back!"

Bart just laughed, because apparently he was the spawn of Reverse Flash, not Barry.

Tim wanted to apologize to Steph for forcing her to make up with Cass. She was right, this was unforgivable.

“What is wrong with you? What possessed you to do this?” He demanded.

“Well, for starters, you were ghosting our calls,” Cissie said, throwing open the van’s side door. “We’ve been trying to get in touch with you for days, but you never answered.”

“Oops, sorry not sorry,” Tim said dryly.

They’d been blowing up his phone with apologies. Tim was allergic to those, so he’d blocked their numbers. Alas, Bart had shared his number with Greta. Shame on him.

“Yeah, well the irony wasn’t lost on us,” Anita said. “We figured we’d return the favor.”

They filed out of the van. Kon lifted Tim out by the shoulders, and plopped him onto a conveniently located folding chair in the middle of the room.

They were in a dilapidated warehouse that smelled like dead fish and refuse. A single, bare bulb flickered above them, and a wall of boarded up windows left in a draft. It smelled like Gotham’s harbor.

. . . Were they still in the city?

“If you won't listen to our apologies, we’ll make you,” Greta said, looking extra misty. “I wanted to possess you and bring you here, but the others wouldn’t let me, so we kidnapped you instead.”

Too many puzzle pieces were colliding together. Tim didn’t like the picture they were forming.

“You guys were the ones stalking me?” He said, aghast.

“That’s right, buddy,” Kon said, pointing victoriously at Tim. “The tables have turned, the shoe is on the other foot, the frying pan has thrown you into the fire, and you’re getting a taste of your own medicine. How does it feel to be the one stalked?”

He cackled like the two-bit Luthor lovechild he was.

Tim stamped his exasperated fondness into the depths of his subconscious and scowled.

“It sucks,” Tim said. Young Justice was officially on his bad list. “I thought my identity had been compromised . . . *Is* it compromised? Do you know who I am? What’s my name? Where do I live? Who was my third grade teacher?”

“No clue,” Cissie said as she finally got her and Anita’s braids untangled. “Impulse was the only one who followed you during the day. We didn’t want you to get in trouble with Batman again by cracking your identity without permission.”

Tim turned to his beloved speedster. “You’re dead to me.”

Bart sat on a throne of empty soft drink cans and candy wrappers. His face was smeared with brightly colored substances, and he looked as unrepentant as Cass after stealing an entire tray of cookies. “Worth it. Evil pays too well to stay on the side of justice.”

He wrapped a wad of gummy bears in a fruit roll-up and stuffed it into his mouth.

Tim huffed in annoyance. Figured Young Justice cottoned onto Bart’s weakness (sugar) and used it against him. This was the worst use of the team’s brain cell since the team’s conception. How dare they corrupt the only sensible human on this planet with high-fructose corn syrup and red food dye. Tim would remember this.

“I don’t want your apologies,” Tim said, trying to wriggle out of his bonds. He could do it easily. The trick would be outrunning Bart. “Save them for a mammal who cares.”

“Sorry, no can do.” Kon used his tactile telekineses (TTK) to make the ropes on Tim’s wrist too hard to cut. “You’ve fallen into our trap. There’s no escape.”

This was worse than being trapped in the panic room during the Joker debacle. At least then, there'd only been an irritated Jason and a bored Cass to contend with. Here, there were *emotions.*

If Tim wasn't tied up, he'd transform and escape. The problem was *that he was tied up.* Tim's clothes changed when he shifted, but manacles and bonds didn't. If he tried shifting, the rope would cut into his flesh as it expanded. Tim could end up with nerve damage if he wasn't careful.

Stupid TTK. It was all that stood between Tim and freedom.

Kon cleared his throat. "Look, Rob, we'll make this quick, but it's important that we tell you we're sorry. Me especially. I'm told I've been an insensitive jerk to you this whole time, but you're actually pretty solid. I want to make it up with you."

"Us too," Cissie said, stepping forward. "There've been some misunderstandings between us, but I think we can fix them if you're willing."

Greta clasped her hands together and nodded. "I really want to see more of you, Robin. You're not like the other boys I've met. You're different."

No duh. Tim wasn't a real boy. He was a dragon with a human meat suit and a 1.9 GPA. He dared anyone to find another teenager like him.

"The long and short of it is that we want to be friends with you for real, Robin. If you'll let us." Cassie sat in front of Tim. She fidgeted, but met his eyes. Not a lot of people could do that without overexposure to him. She was brave.

Tim paused his struggles to escape his restraints and assessed them.

They looked genuine—a mix of nervousness, hope, and fear—and Young Justice wasn't known for subtly. The odds of them telling the truth were 99.999%, simply because they couldn't craft a decent lie to save their lives.

But that meant—

“You stalked me because you *cared?”* he said.

They nodded eagerly.

“I figured it’d be a gesture you appreciated,” Kon said. “After all, what better way to a weirdo stalker’s heart than weirdly stalking them back?”

“Spoiler mentioned it was your love language back at the rodeo, so we figured it was worth a shot,” Anita explained.

“It was a stupid plan,” Cassie said. She threw the arrow she’d been sharpening at Kon’s head. It bounced off his invulnerable skull like a bouncy ball. “But none of us could think of a better one.”

“Did it work?” Cassie asked Tim, smiling sheepishly.

Tim looked around the dilapidated warehouse, their shady white van, and the speedster they’d turned traitor. The effort it took to set this up was nothing to sneeze at.

On one hand, he was upset and annoyed he’d been kidnapped by a bunch of scatterbrained idiots. He’d never hear the end of it from his hoard.

On the other . . . It was pretty darn sweet.

If anyone could appreciate a good, old-fashioned kidnapping to show affection, it was Tim. That *was* how he got Jason, after all.

“It was perfect,” he said, smiling with all his human teeth.

Maybe he could this friend thing another shot.

Chapter End Notes

Kon: So, no hard feelings about the rodeo?
Tim: Nah, just never bring it up again. Seriously. I hate emotional discussions. They're my kryptonite.
Anita: Noted. No feelings around Robin.
Tim: There's hope for you yet.

Ten minutes later, Black Bat and Spoiler burst through the windows, guns blazing, to rescue Robin from his kidnappers. If Tim hadn't been there to calm them down, Young Justice would have joined Greta as ghosts real quick.

Kon: le gasp. How did you find us? We portaled away from you!

Steph *gestures at the warehouse*: You're still in Gotham! You only teleported, like, five blocks away!

Greta: In my defense, I didn't even know I could do this until, like, yesterday.

If any of y'all are wondering what Charlotte looks like. This is my inspiration for her.
Charlotte My Beloved

The Gotham Special

Chapter Summary

Tim and his friends (!) have an amazing weekend in Gotham, Jason rants, Cass girlbosses, and Bruce crumbles like a house of cards.

Chapter Notes

I fell into the classic blunder of deciding to write a couple scenes for another fic before finishing this chapter . . . so naturally I've posted 20k of Double Trouble in the last week and hyperfixated on nonsense. This happens waaaay too often, guys. Should I be concerned? 🤔

Enjoy a self-indulgent chapter of friendship shenanigans. 😉

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim burst into the Batcave at 3 AM, Cass hot on his heels. It'd taken hours for her and Steph to pry him away from Young Justice, who'd officially taken friend-status back from the jaws of defeat, and Tim was still high on dopamine.

Friends. He had more friends!

Jack was going to be so happy. Tim was already planning a friend-day to hang out with his new humans. It was going to be marvelous.

Although, the prospect of socializing brought up some problems. Namely, that he'd failed miserably at it before, and didn't want to screw up again.

“B!” he yelled as he got off his motorcycle. “People want to socialize with me. What do I do?”

Bruce froze, hunched over the batcomputer with several empty bags of chips and a bottle of Dr. Pepper open in front of him. Seven computer monitors were lit up with grisly murder photos and a map of Gotham. He stared at Tim like a deer in headlights, horror etched in his face.

“Right, sorry, my mistake,” Tim said, remembering who he was talking to. He ran the opposite direction. “Dick!”

Bruce sighed in relief.

Behind him, Cass chuckled and poked Bruce's face. “Boomer.”

“Watch it, young lady,” he said, using his cape as a blanket. “You'll end up like me someday.”

“Sad and lame?” Cass said.

The last thing Tim heard before he made it up the stairs and out of the cave was Bruce's sigh as Cass wandered off, leaving him to his late-night introvert time.

***

Dick did not appreciate being woken up right after falling asleep after a long, grueling patrol. He muttered something about crashing at Babs' from now on, and told Tim to trust his instincts and let him pass out again.

“My instincts? The thing that got me into this mess?” Tim said, appalled.

Dick threw a pillow at him and burrowed deeper under the pillow, covering his ears with both hands.

Well. Fine, if that's how he wanted to be.

Instincts it was.

***

Early afternoon on the last Saturday of May, Tim got permission for his gaggle of buddies to come to Gotham. Operation Get Friends was over, but Operation Keep His Friends had just begun. A full day of revelry and harmless antics awaited.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Tim said, spreading his arms wide. “Make yourselves at home.”

Young Justice looked around Drake manor with varying levels of discomfort. Tim got permission from Jack to invite his friends over, since Wayne Manor would have meant revealing Bruce's identity. (Currently, Young Justice thought Tim was Batman's intern, which technically wasn't wrong, and Tim was trying to respect Bruce's “boundaries” and not reveal his secret identity to random teenagers.)

“You're rich?” Kon said, eying the ten thousand-dollar paintings in disbelief. *“You?”*

“Eh, kind of,” Tim shrugged. “I've got a trust fund and over twenty grand in photography equipment, so I guess. I prefer Crime Alley though. It has a better aesthetic.”

Jack was big on minimalism in the main areas of the house, keeping Janet's clutter hidden upstairs. It left the first floor feeling like a museum, especially with all the plaques of antiques in glass display cabinets.

“I think it looks wonderful here,” Greta said. Her cheeks blushed as she floated closer to Tim. “Almost as nice as you.”

“Cool, I'll let my dad know,” Tim said. “He'll be so happy to hear it he'll cry. It took a lot of remodels to get it like this.”

Since the death match last year, the first floor had been completely remodeled. Jack had sighed about how much the renovations cost, but Tim was glad Janet insisted he use high-quality materials. Sure, she and Tim liked to destroy the house in their spare time, but that was no excuse for poor craftsmanship.

Bart poked an antique vase. It fell to the ground and smashed into a thousand pieces.

“Or just cry,” Tim said, poking the carnage with his toe. “That was Tsing dynasty. We should probably hang out somewhere else.”

Janet was going to be really mad. She'd stolen that piece from a private collection when Tim was six. Even Jack hadn't been able to convince her to put it back.

“Tsing what?” Slobo said. “Is that nerd talk for something?”

“Nah, it just means it belongs in a museum behind bullet-proof glass,” Tim said.

Anita, Cassie, and Cissie, and Kon paled.

“Oh God,” Cissie said. “Please don't make us pay you back. I'm a ward of the state. I'm too poor for that.”

“Huh? Why would I do that?” Tim said, kicking the shards into the corner. “We have gorilla glue, it'll be fine. Come on, follow me.”

He should've known not to take supers to a civilian location. None of Young Justice were archeology nerds; Drake Manor was wasted on them. Luckily, he had backup plans.

“Where are we going?” Kon asked as Tim shoved him toward the front door.

Tim smiled deviously. “To gloat.”

***

Jason opened his front door, bleary-eyed and shirtless. His autopsy scar was on full display, as was his displeasure.

“Timborino,” he said, “It's four o'clock in the afternoon. It's too early for another kidnapping attempt—what the hell?”

Tim grinned and gestured at his friends, who were crammed on the stairs by Jason's apartment. “Look, socializing worked! I'm officially part of the team and *you're* officially stupid. I've become versed in the ways of extroverts, and have an entire legion of minions.”

“Hi,” Greta said, poking her head through a wall. “Nice to meet you. Why is your soul acid green?”

Jason's face did Flying Grayson level acrobatics. He leaned against the wall for support. “Well, I'll be damned. Again. Good for you, Baby Bird, you found new victims.”

“We're his friends, actually,” Kon said, looking uneasily at Jason's tapestry of scars, toned muscles, and RBF. “Or, learning to be. And you're . . ?”

“This is Jason, my murder bro,” Tim said. “He likes to decapitate people.”

And read old romance novels, but Tim was trying to paint Jason in a good light, so he didn't mention that.

“'Sup,” Jason yawned. “I guess if you're finally being nice to Timbo, I'll scrap the torture plans for your team. You guys like pancakes?”

Young Justice stared, long and hard.

“I mean, yeah?” Cissie said. “Torture?”

“Cool,” Jason said. He opened his door the rest of the day. “Come on in.”

Tim's smile got wider as he shoved his friends into Jason's gross, old apartment. Introducing his hoard to each other was off to a great start.

“Wait, no, I mean it,” Cissie said. “What was that about torture?”

***

Tim's original plan had been to steal food from Jason, brag about his amazing friends who kidnapped him (take that Jason, it *was* a valid friendship technique), then drag Young Justice around the city to see all the local attractions—Amusement Mile, Gotham Bay, the dumpster Black Mask threw bodies into—to get the full Gotham experience.

That plan didn't get off the ground, because Tim made a fatal mistake. He accidentally mentioned that he'd never seen the whole Lord of the Rings trilogy.

“But you make references,” Jason said, horrified. “You know the memes!”

Tim shrugged. “Dad never let me or Mom watch them. He said we'd get the wrong idea about the Nazgul.”

All the references Tim made were from the clips he'd seen, and random Internet chat boards he lurked on.

During his molt, Dick had turned on the Fellowship for him, but Tim had passed out before the Hobbits left the Shire and only woke up when they got to that elf city near the end. He'd been in too much pain to remember anything else, so Dick had turned on Power Rangers and Dragon Tales instead.

“Every day I find another way this world has failed you,” Jason said, taking deep, measured breaths. Cassie edged away as Jason's eyes started to glow green. “This needs to be fixed *now.”*

Which was how Tim and Young Justice became hostages during Jason's movie marathon for the next thirteen hours. The doors were locked, their phones were confiscated, and participation was mandatory.

Cissie made a token effort to escape once the clock struck midnight, but Jason pinned her with a very green, very unhinged stare until she sat back down and watched the murder trees fight a wizard and win.

Around 2 AM, Nightwing crawled in through the window. “Hey Jay, have you seen—oh, there you are, Tim. Hi Tim's friends!”

Tim rolled his eyes and turned the TV volume up. Apparently, Jason and Dick were fine using civilian names. It miffed Tim, because he'd been careful not to reveal his secret identity after giving it to Impulse because Bruce got huffy about it. To think it had been a complete waste of time . . .

“I thought it was weird you weren't on patrol,” Dick said to Jason. “Wasn't there a child trafficker you were after? You know, the one Bruce was trying to arrest first so you didn't go R-rated levels of violence on the guy?”

“These heathens don't understand the emotional undertones of Boromir's death, or how grief is a consistent theme through all three films. It's my duty to fix that,” Jason said, gesturing wildly. He spilled half the tub of popcorn he was holding.

Dick flopped onto the couch and stole the popcorn bowl. “Blah blah blah, nerd rant, got it. Guess Hubert Tunsely is going to Blackgate after all. Bruce will be happy about that.”

“Tunsely? What are you talking about? He isn't—oh damn, I was supposed to kill him tonight.” Jason slumped against the couch and glared at the TV. “Baby Bird distracted me.”

“I had nothing to do with this,” Tim said, eyes fixed on the screen. He hadn't blinked in hours.

The Ringwraiths had *flying reptile buddies.* Flying reptiles that got to eat horses, throw people through the air like rag dolls, and eat whatever they wanted carte blanche. Jack had kept these wonderful role models from Tim and Janet for *years.* He and his dad needed to have a *talk.*

“We're bonding with Tim!” Bart said, popping up from where he'd buried himself in the beanbag on the floor. It was the same brand Bruce kept in the manor's panic room. “And also with Jason, but only because he won't let us leave.”

“My dad is probably filing a missing person's report,” Anita said, a bit glazed. “I told him I'd be back by eight.”

“Aw, a movie night. That's sweet,” Dick said, ignoring the kidnapping situation. “I'm so glad you guys are getting along. Maybe Young Justice can have some bonding activities this summer. The Titans used to do it all the time, before we joined society as dead beat adults. I miss having free time . . .”

Tim and Jason snorted. Dick had plenty of free time. He just used it to take Barbara to expensive restaurants and act like the second coming of Brucie Wayne.

“That sounds fun,” Cassie said. “I'm down for some team building exercises. Now that Tim's officially on the team, we need to spend more time together. What were you thinking, Nightwing?”

Dick lit up with the smile he gave rogues before psychologically breaking them.

“Well,” he said, glancing at Tim. “I'm sure I can think of a couple ideas.”

Tim rubbed his arms to ward off a chill. He was an apex predator, but Dick's expression made him feel hunted.

. . . Maybe introducing his friends to his hoard was a bad idea.

***

Young Justice was released back into the wild the next morning after a breakfast at Waffle House.

Steph and Cass showed up by coincidence, which turned an already loud meal into a cacophony of teenage chaos. Steph and Greta pointed at each other, then started arguing loudly about something Tim didn't care enough about to pay attention to, Anita called her dad to apologize for going missing, and Kon kept sighing like the protagonist of one of Dick's soap operas.

“What is the matter with you?” Tim asked after the sixth sigh in a row.

“Nothing,” Kon said, staring across the table at Cass. “Random question, is your sister single?”

“She's not—” Tim sighed. Cass gave him noogies whenever he said she wasn't family. “Yeah, she's not dating anybody. Why?”

“No reason,” Kon said, then pulled out a sharpie and wrote his phone number on a napkin for her.

Cass took it and winked at Kon. Tim grimaced in disgust. He thought Cass was on his side about romance. Traitor. Bart's Judas impersonation had nothing on this. How dare she go to the dark side (feels) when there were so many better things to do with her time.

They were thrown out of Waffle House an hour later by the totally-a-hitman manager, then wandered the city looking for the nearest zeta tube.

“There's one a couple blocks away,” Tim said. “I'll take you . . . Where's Bart?”

Everyone looked at the blank space where Impulse was supposed to be and groaned. A speedster loose in Gotham was a disaster waiting to happen.

Tim was pulling out his phone to text an apology to Bruce for future property damage when a familiar red blur rammed into him.

“I'm here, I'm here!” Bart said, beaming like the sun. He was windswept and smelled like static electricity. Tim made a mental note to ask Babs to scrub the security cameras so nobody caught him on film.

“Thank goodness. Where were you?” Cassie said. “We were just about to leave.”

“Sorry, I got distracted by this cool rock. I *had* to get it for Rob,” Bart said. He pulled out a small chunk of gravel from his pocket. It was shaped like a Fruit Loop and had purple speckles.

“Wow, that's amazing!” Tim said, touched. “Is it really for me?”

“Robin, it's a piece of asphalt,” Kon said.

“It's *beautiful.* Imp, you're the best friend ever!” Tim said, ignoring the dumb half-kryptonian who *clearly* didn't spend enough time around rocks. “I'll put in my hoard with the rest on my treasure.”

He gave his speedster a hug. Bart was tactile. He liked physical affection, and Tim had been taking hug notes from Dick.

“Sweet. I also got you this awesome ring,” Bart said, pulling it out of his pocket. It was one of those prize rings people won from carnival games. “See? It has a plastic diamond. As the kids these days say, that's bougie.”

“This is the best day of my life,” Tim said as he slipped it onto his left hand. “Your offering is noted and accepted.”

“Anything for you,” Bart said.

“Vice versa,” Tim said. He turned to the others. “*See?* This is how friends treat each other.”

“By giving each other rings?” Anita said, looking amused.

“And rocks!” Bart said. “The rocks are very important.”

Tim nodded. Bart was the best human (sans Bruce) because he understood Tim's intrinsic need to collect doodads for his hoard. Not to mention they had the same taste in food. That was a nice perk.

Kon nodded, stroking his chin with the air of someone taking this advice to heart. The girls looked at each other with exasperation.

“You guys sure you're platonic?” Cissie asked.

Tim and Bart cocked their heads to the side.

“Yeah?” Tim said. “What else would we be?”

“Never mind,” Cissie said. “As long as you're happy.”

***

Once the last Young Justice member left via the zeta tube, Tim, Steph, and Cass were left stranded on the sidewalk in down town Gotham. There were still a few hours until Alfred made pancakes for Sunday lunch, but after nearly twenty-four hours of fun they didn't feel like carousing the city. Homeward bound it was. Naps awaited.

“You're seriously going to go out with Superboy?” Steph said to Cass as they walked to the bus, sounding just as thrilled as Tim. “Girl, you can do so much better.”

Cass finished creating a contact for Kon on her phone and send him a couple heart emojis. “I know. This just for fun.”

“There's nothing fun about romance,” Tim said. “Who are you and what did you do to Cass?”

She was supposed to be his ally in all things romance-related. Brainwashing was looking likely. Or worse, *love.* Gross.

“Kon says he will buy me food,” Cass said, pocketing her phone. “New snack minion. Pretending to want to kiss him so he'll get me all the treats.”

“So, you're just using him for his money?” Steph said as the three of them boarded the Blue Line bus back to Bristol. “That's diabolical.”

Cass nodded smugly. “Secret hunting technique. Have him gather food for me.”

Tim relaxed. *This* sounded like the Cass he knew and loved.

“You're going to break that boy's heart,” Steph said, without sounding particularly torn up about it.

“Can't gaslight you anymore,” Cass said. “Need new entertainment. Kon is easy victim. Looks dumb as Timmy.”

“I resent that,” Tim said. “I'm super smart.”

Cass snorted, and Tim sent a prayer to Superboy. Once Cass had a scheme in the works, resistance was futile.

Rest in peace, Kon El, newest victim of Black Bat. He'd live as he died; a moron.

***

“It worked, B,” Tim said in the Batcave that night. Ivy had been spotted in Robinson Park, so they were making a cure to her latest pollen before confronting her later in the week. “I made a whole group of friends, not just one or two, *and* we had a great time.”

“I'm proud of you, champ,” Bruce said, ruffling Tim's hair. “Your dad will be happy it's official.”

Jack's dream of Tim exploring his human DNA had finally been fulfilled.

“You can tell him instead of me,” Tim said. “He'll cry and that's gross.”

Bruce chuckled. “You can tell him yourself next month. He's coming to visit.”

Tim almost dropped a vial of cuddle pollen. “ *What? ”*

“Business with Drake industries,” Bruce explained. “Not to mention your birthday. I thought he told you.”

Jack hadn't, probably because Tim would have had to make plans to flee the country until Janet was gone.

“What about Mom?” Tim asked Bruce. “There's no way she agreed to this.”

“We're negotiating with her.” Bruce said.

That wasn't reassuring. Janet rarely left earshot of Jack. She was more possessive of her mate than Dick was of cereal. No way would she want Jack within grabbing range of Tim. He'd have to talk to her on the next family video chat and see what was going on.

“Aww, did you tell him, Bruce?” Dick said, wandering over. He slouched against the batcomputer. “I thought we agreed it'd be a surprise.”

“Dragons and surprises don't mix,” Bruce said, marking another chemical compound in the pollen.

“Neither do laid-back parenting techniques and homicidal murder lizards, but you didn't listen when we told you that,” Dick said dryly. “You excited to see your dad again, Tim?”

“Yeah, I haven't seen him in forever,” Tim said. “But I thought you didn't want my parents in Gotham since Mom and I get along too well.”

Tim and Janet were a house on fire, and whatever houses they were in tended to get lit on fire as well. It made for a lot of unforgettable family holidays.

“Children should get to spend time with their parents,” Bruce said, avoiding eye contact.

Tim raised an eyebrow.

“What he means,” Dick translated, “is that last time they talked, Jack started gushing about how much he regrets not getting too see you grow up this last year, and Bruce went into a depressive spiral because he's terrified of his own children leaving the nest. So, now Jack and Janet are coming back for a couple months this summer.”

Tim raised his other eyebrow, unimpressed. Bruce was a moron. Jack had played him like a fiddle.

“Don't give me that look,” Dick said. “I told him it was a bad idea, but when Jack and Bruce agree on something it's pointless to argue.”

Huh. Kind of like how when Dick and Babs teamed up it was better to give in and suffer.

“The Drakes will be back in Gotham in a couple weeks,” Bruce said, returning to the toxin charts. “We will figure out preventative measures before then.”

“Preventative measures,” Dick muttered. “That implies violence can be *avoided.”*

He wandered off, grumbling about Janet being a bad influence on Tim because she bit first and asked questions later. Please, that was the best influence Tim could ever ask for. Dick was just salty

because she was a better parent than him.

“You excited, champ?” Bruce asked Tim, a little nervously.

“Totally,” Tim said, and made a mental note to buy more poison off Amazon.

As cool as seeing his dad again was, if Janet was back in town, he had to be prepared.

Chapter End Notes

Jason: Kidnapping is bad, Tim.
Jason *kidnaps all of YJ and marathons LOTR with them*
Tim: I'm sensing a double-standard.

BTW, the Kon/Cass is solely because I found out they dated in canon and thought it was hilarious. I don't really ship them, but I think Cass would go out with him for Belgium waffles and gossip. Kon-Extrovert-El is just happy to hang out with a pretty girl and gab about the Kardashians, even after she tells him she's not interested. (TLDR: they're not going to be a couple.)

Meanwhile, in Robinson Park.

Ivy *reading a book on sexual identity while classical music plays in the background*: First step is accepting who you are? Bullshit! I can live in denial as long as I want.
Plants *judgmental stares*
Ivy: Oh, shut up. I'm FINE. I'm going to be a plant-mom if it kills me--and if any of you make another joke about "pining" I'll turn off the music.
Plants *offended*

Diners, Drive-ins, and Dragons

Chapter Summary

The Drakes' visit looms closer, and plans for Tim's summer go underway.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! A few important updates.

I'm sorry for taking so long to post. I got spammed with hate comments, and then two days later my dad had a stroke. It's been a rough couple of weeks, and since this fic revolves around families, it became suddenly much harder to write. I live far from my parents, so the distance between Tim and the other Drakes has been difficult to revisit. It's a good thing they're coming to Gotham soon.

Also, you might notice, Happy Families is now part of a series! 🥳 Currently, there is a prequel with Janet's POV when Tim is a baby, but I plan to add a couple more stories to the series, so keep your eyes peeled for those.

I want to give a shoutout to my amazing friends RavenGranger and TheStoryVerse for being wonderful humans, and being there through all of this *gestures at my on-fire, garbage life.* If I were a dragon, you'd be in my hoard.

Thank you to everyone who's followed this story as well. Your comments have helped me through a lot of hard times, especially over the past few weeks. You guys are the favorite part of my day. I never want to poke people into leaving comments, but just know they mean a lot to me, especially right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Having friends was great. Tim was glad Young Justice had dragged him kicking and screaming into their lineup. Now that he was officially part of the team, he got to hang out with Bart, Kon, Cassie, and the others whenever he wanted, fix the abysmal firewalls on the team's network, plan missions for them, and spam the group chat with messages.

The only downside was that he didn't get *enough* time with them, which Tim blamed on high school. He hated it more than his internship.

And high school? It hated him right back.

During finals week, Tim made the mistake of coming to school with a massive bruise on his face. Tim wanted to kick himself. He'd forgotten to put on foundation.

He was usually careful to hide his injuries, but he'd been distracted. Evading Alfred had already been difficult, so he hadn't planned ahead properly. It was horribly sloppy of Tim, who prided himself on being schemey. He'd need to be more careful when plotting his and Slobo's Fight Club meetings.

What his slip-up resulted in was his emergency contact—Dick—being called in to take him home and answer some questions about Tim's home life.

Dick was *not* happy, especially since he'd been working a double shift. He looked like death warmed over when he stumbled through the doors of the principal's office.

Tim's protective instincts itched to bury his hoard member in a mountain of blankets, then growl at Gordon for giving him so much overtime, and burn down a precinct or two to drive the message home. Dick was *not* supposed to look that tired. It was a sin against nature.

When Dick saw Tim's face though, that exhaustion turned into rage.

It was easy to forget Dick had a temper as bad as Bruce, but when he got angry it was like a nuclear warhead going off. Peace was not a word in his dictionary, and righteousness wore gauntlets soaked in blood.

Tim got warm fuzzy feelings whenever Dick got like that. Anger due to protective instincts being activated was the best kind. Dick needed to let his rage out more often.

Just not on Tim's behalf. Tim could take care of himself, thank you.

Turning that anger on Tim should've also been illegal. But then again, Tim should've known better to open his mouth.

Dick and the principal had been shouting at each other about who was to blame for Tim's injury. Since it'd happened off-campus, the principal had assumed it was the Waynes' fault. Dick—for obvious reasons—didn't buy that for a second, and asked Tim where it'd come from.

Since Tim has *also* had a late night, and was currently sporting a bruise as purple as Spoiler's costume, he'd accidentally told the truth.

"Oh," Tim said casually, thinking about what kind of coffee he wanted before patrol, "I was just hanging out with my buddy this morning. He smashed my face into a dumpster."

"What," Dick said, in a flate voice.

"Uh," Tim said, freezing like a deer in front of a semi truck.

Oops.

Tim had to spend the next fifteen minutes explaining how he and his friend Shaun (Slobo's new code name, chosen randomly by Tim right now) brawled in a Denny's parking lot for forty-five minutes before school started.

"You should see his face," Tim said proudly. "He barely had any teeth left when I was done with him."

Even better, Slobo had nearly died from Tim's venom, which melted through the bones of one of his legs. Tim had been lucky to get that bite in. Slobo kicked *hard.* Having a friend he could gnaw on was great for his mental health.

The principal eyed her glass of water like she wished it was alcohol, then turned to Dick. "I've said it once, and I'll say it again; get that kid therapy."

"We're working on it," Dick said, pushing Tim toward the door. "Have a nice day."

As soon as they were out of the office, Dick turned to Tim with the most deadpan expression Tim had ever seen on his face.

“You’re not allowed to fight Slobo until *after* school, got it?” Dick said.

Tim reared back, offended. “You’re the one who wanted me to make friends. Stop gatekeeping when I can access them. This is a double-standard!”

They speed-walked back to the car. Tim hissed and snarled under his breath the whole way. Humans, *really.* There was no happy answer. If Tim wanted to have death matches in random parking lots with his buddies, he should be allowed to. He was a responsible dragon. He wouldn ’t *actually* kill Slobo.

Probably. The temptation to bite his head off was strong, but Tim wasn’t sure if Slobo could come back from that. Jack would lecture him *forever* if he ate his friend, since it took so long for Tim to get so many.

“Tim, I’m running on one hour of sleep,” Dick said as he got behind the wheel of the family Jaguar. “I just finished a fourteen-hour graveyard shift. We ran out of my favorite cereal at the manor. A new homicide case is eating up all my time at the precinct. It has *not* been a good day. I’d *appreciate* it if you didn’t make it worse. If you want to get pulverized by Lobo’s teenage blood clone, *fine,* I’m not stopping you, but your principal looked two minutes away from calling CPS. So, for the love of Frosted Flakes *do not test me right now.”*

Tim appraised his hoard member. Dick looked worse than Tim, even though he wasn’t the one that’d been beat up. His eyes were bloodshot, he needed to shave, and he was still wearing his rumpled work uniform. There was a suspicious stain on one of the sleeves. Gordon must have put Dick on more serial killer cases to get back at him for dating Babs.

“Fine, I’ll just fight him on the weekends,” Tim said, slumping in his seat. “But only so you can get more rest.”

Dick sighed, tension bleeding out of him. “Thanks, bud. I appreciate it.”

They drove back to the manor in silence. Dick almost crashed the car twice because he kept falling asleep. Tim had to grab the wheel so the car didn't slide into a ditch.

He hoped Babs had a master plan to get back at Gordon for this, because Dick wasn't allowed to look so tired. It had to be fixed immediately.

***

After Dick brought him home, Tim had taken a nap and spent the rest of the morning making wire sculptures to add to his bone mobiles in Gotham.

Now, it was around lunch. Cass had just returned from her morning class and tracked him down with manic glee.

"Dance camp?" Tim said, leaning away from the paper she'd thrown at him.

Cass nodded, shoving the flyer back into his face. "For grifted kids."

"Gifted kids," Tim corrected.

"Same word," Cass said, rolling her eyes.

Tim agreed to disagree. That one letter made a world of difference.

He took a closer look at the paper. There was a four-day ballet retreat hosted by his and Cass' studio. The students would spend the week on a small, Vermont Maple Farm practicing choreography, then fly to NYC to perform for a charity. It cost a small fortune, but there'd be scouts from professional teams in attendance, and lots of free food.

"Want to go," Cass said. "Buy Steph syrup."

“I thought you could only buy it in March? Or February? One of those months,” Tim said, squinting at the flyer. It didn’t have prices for maple syrup.

“Will find a way,” Cass said. She hung off his arm, nearly pulling Tim off his bar stool. “Come on, Timmy. Help trick Bruce to let me go.”

“You don’t need to trick him. He’d buy you an entire island chain if you asked,” Tim said. He’d also buy her islands. All the islands. A small country, even. Cass deserved the world. “Dance camp is an automatic yes.”

“More fun to be sneaky,” she said, like a true Wayne. “You coming too.”

Tim double-checked the dates. “That should work out.”

Jack and Janet were coming back for Tim’s birthday, which was still a couple weeks away. The dance camp was in early July, so it’d be a good escape from the Annual Drake Civil War, though Tim would have to lock up all his treasures so Janet couldn’t rob him. He knew she wanted to steal his opals. Something about “avenging her collection” from when he was a baby.

“Good. We go,” Cass said, dragging him to Bruce’s office. “Will be a party. Me, you, and Charlotte.”

“Charlotte’s going to be there?” Tim said, digging his heels into the ground. “I guess you don’t actually need me, then.”

Stupid Charlotte, with her flowing locks and robust figure, accompanied by a deep, booming laugh that shook the windows. She was the epitome of power and grace. If *she* was going to Dance Camp, Tim wanted nothing to do with it.

“Jealous?” Cass said, poking his cheek.

“I’m justifiably irritated,” Tim said, crossing his arms. “I’m *not* jealous.”

Cass could have as many friends as she wanted. But Tim didn't have to like them.

"Don't be mad. Charlotte funny, but not as funny as you," Cass said, bumping her head against his. "You still favorite dance buddy. Have to come, for the mems."

Tim tried to pout, but couldn't help melting a little. He was still her favorite? Even though he wasn't as good at ballet as Charlotte? That was—that was—well, obviously, Cass had great taste.

"I guess I can go," Tim said, feeling a purr build in his chest. "Since you asked so nice."

Cass rolled her eyes again, and dragged him to Bruce's office. This was blatant manipulation, but Tim didn't care. He could endure all forms of torture for Cass' affection.

He was the favorite. Take that, Charlotte.

***

Bruce said yes to Dance camp. *All* the camps. Black Bat was going to be busy this summer. Tim volunteered to go on the long ballet one, but since his time was going to be divided between his family, Young Justice, and his internship, he was spared most of the dance mania.

"I don't know how you're going to survive all this,' Tim said, calculating how many hours Cass would be in the dance studio. "You're going to have thighs of steel."

Thicker steel, anyway. Cass was basically in perfect condition.

"Dream body," Cass said, nodding in delight. "Level up my mad skills for glory."

She used the voice to speech function on her phone to pull up a list of dance competitions she wanted to compete it.

All it took were Bambi eyes and a “please, Dad” and Bruce was signing her up for those too, and ordering her an entire closet full of performance outfits.

“It’s a good thing you’re a billionaire,” Tim said, watching the numbers go up on the online cart.

“It’s going to a good cause,” Bruce said, with a look of of enormous pride.

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” Tim said.

Cass wasn’t just a good cause. She was the *best* cause, even though she liked bullying Tim. Most dragons wouldn’t tolerate their hoards getting uppity, but Tim was a benevolent dictator.

It didn’t hurt that he was riding the high of being the favored Dance Minion. Cass wanted him to be her partner for all the competitions, which was a *high* honor. He’d let Cass do almost anything right now.

Still, it was going to be a busy summer, what with him ping-ponging between Mt. Justice, WE, and the Batcave. Tim’s calendar was filling up at an alarming rate, even without high school in the way.

Oh well, anything was better than standardized tests. Tim would deal. Plus, he got built in hoard time.

July and August were going to be insane though. Life was always twice as complicated when Jack and Janet were in town.

Tim sighed. There was no rest for the draconic.

***

The next day, Bruce tried to skip out on an important meeting at WE. Sadly, Alfred and Lucius bullied him into going. Which was fine, except Bruce insisted on bringing Tim as his Emotional Support Child of the day.

After being banished from the meeting because he kept shooting rubber bands at one of the shareholders, Tim was shoved into his cubicle to crunch numbers. It was boring, even when he threw the calculator out, so he slunk off to the break room to mope.

At least if he was miserable he could have a snack too.

And he was miserable. *So* miserable. Miserable and bored. The worst combination. Life was agony.

“What’s wrong now, Tim?” Tam asked as she grabbed a bag of chips. Lucius hadn’t let her into the meeting either. “You’ve been sighing all day. It’s driving me crazy.”

“Sorry,” Tim said, looking up from the counter. “My parents are coming back to town, so I’m catastrophizing.”

He had to call Jack and Janet later tonight to go over the family reunion do’s and don’ts. He was *not* looking forward to it, and he didn’t even have a fun task to take his mind off it.

Tam frowned as she opened the chips. “Do they not like you or something? I’ve never seen you three in the same room.”

“No, we get along great,” Tim said, waving his butter knife dismissively. “There’s just always a lot of drama when they come to town.”

He rubbed his cheek, remembering the last time he and Janet were under the same roof. He wondered if she still got phantom pain in her shoulder from where he’d bit her

“That tracks,” Tam said. “Didn’t they get stranded in Russia a couple years ago?”

“And India,” Tim said, and went back to making his sandwich.

Jack and Janet had so many weird adventures, it was harder to find something they *hadn’t* done. The only reason they weren’t trending on the front page more often was because they got up to trouble in random, obscure locations instead of in range of the paparazzi. Jack tried to keep Tim and Janet out of the media as much as possible.

“Well,” Tam said, leaning against the counter. “If you ever want to talk about it, I’ll listen. I know parents can be tough.”

“Oh, thanks,” Tim said, surprised. That was one of the first non-angry sentences he’d heard her say since Lucius dragged her here. “You’re nice, Tam.”

“No, I’m not,” she said. “And what are you doing to that poor bread?”

Tim held up his wonderful creation. “Improving it. Are you hungry? I can share.”

He was lucky his favorite ingredients were in the cupboards so he could make Superior Snacks.

“Are those fish heads?” Tam said, sounding disgusted and intrigued.

“Sardines, marshmallow, and chunky peanut butter,” Tim said proudly. “I forgot to add capers, but this is one of my favorite combos. Want to try?”

He held his sandwich out to her. A drop of fish oil fell onto the floor.

Tam blinked, then blinked again before shrugging. “Sure, why not? If it’s bad, I’ll just feed it to my dad.”

***

Tam said the sardines and peanut butter were good, but said Tim was a masochistic freak for adding marshmallows to the equation.

“We can’t all have good taste,” Tim said, patting the bread. It needed comfort after that rejection. “Thanks for trying it though.”

None of his humans ever wanted his Tim Specials. Tam just won serious points with him.

“You don’t have any taste, stop lying to yourself,” she said. “Now, fork it over.”

Before Tim knew what was happening, his poor sandwich was kidnapped. Tam snuck it into Lucius’s lunchbox as part of her Daughter Against Dads campaign, and Tim was forced to watch his lunch get eaten by someone who didn’t appreciate the artistry that went into creating it at all.

“I can’t believe you were serious about that. You owe me a sandwich,” Tim said mournfully, after watching Lucius spit the delectable substance into a trash can. “I was excited to eat that.”

He’d been craving it all day. What a cruel world.

“No I don’t,” she said as she handed him a four pack of Red Bulls.

Tim hugged the Magic Energy Drinks to his chest. “I suppose I can forgive you, just this once. But you’re on thin ice, Tam.”

She was lucky he was easy to bribe. Alfred had banned all the Miracles Juices from the manner, and Babs had somehow hacked Tim’s credit cards so they declined all purchases with energy drinks in them. He was still trying to work around it. He’d need to savor these elixirs, and hide them from the Evil humans who’d confiscate them.

“Whatever,” Tam said. “Do you think I can hide a goldfish in Dad’s water bottle next?”

***

Tim and his mother had a wonderful relationship. Sadly, nobody else saw it this way.

“Look, I’m just saying, it’s not fair,” Tim said for the tenth time. “This is a family vacation, so Mom and I should be allowed to help plan it.”

“I would love you to,” Jack said, for the eleventh time. “But no.”

Tim and Janet grumbled. Negotiations were failing. Using logic and verbal communication had been a mistake, but they were too far away for violence to be an option. Jack had the home turf advantage.

“You’re being unfair,” Tim said. “We actually want to spend time with each other for once, and you won’t let us. Do you even hear yourself, Dad?”

“I’m thrilled that you’re taking the initiative, darlings,” Jack said. “But no mutilating each other, that’s the family rule.”

Janet and Tim gave him the evil eye. Family rules were stupid.

It was bad enough Tim had to let Janet into his territory, but she always hogged Jack. Tim was being *nice* by trying to formally challenge her to a duel for who got to keep him. Figured his dad didn’t understand that.

Tim wanted Jack in his hoard. Now that he had his own nest, it’d be easy to kidnap Jack and hide him in the Batcave while Tim fought Janet to the death above. It’d taken care of all the territory problems and the two of them could enjoy some proper bonding time. It was simple math.

So far, none of the humans were on board. Stupid social creatures.

“You have two options, sweethearts,” Jack said. “Either we go to Canada for a few weeks so you can get your wiggles out in the wilderness, or we stay in Gotham and attend events in public to stop you from transforming. Either way there’ll be no fighting, maiming, murder, or mayhem.”

“You sound like Bruce,” Tim said with a scowl. “Why must you make us suffer?”

“I hate both these plans as well,” Janet said, arms crossed. “Timothy needs an outlet. A few friendly tussels will do wonders for him.”

“I’d feel more comfortable if those tussels weren’t you going for each other’s throats,” Jack said dryly.

Tim and Janet rolled their eyes. It was like Jack didn’t know what a friendly tussel *was.*

“You know we’re not going to actually kill each other, right?” Tim said. “Mom and I have great self-control.”

He pointedly didn’t think about the biohazards under his bed and the how-to videos he’d watched about making homemade rat poison. Or that he very much did want to kill his mom.

Jack gave Tim a look, like he wasn’t fooled at all. “We need to find another outlet for your competitiveness. How’s your internship going? Are you helping Bruce with anything special?”

Tim scowled even more. “No. He won’t let me do anything fun.”

Bruce was forcing him to do all the menial, boring tasks, and Tim was going insane. The only plus side was that he got to hang out with Tam by the water cooler, and she was even angrier about doing grunt work than him. She’d hired him to help “contaminate” Lucius’ food from now on. Tim preferred to say he was improving it.

“Mm, I should give him a call,” Jack said, stroking his chin. “See if we can work something out so you’re not chewing the furniture. You could always switch to Drake Industries for the summer. I can let you spearhead a charity initiative.”

“No thanks,” Tim said, “there aren’t any hoard members there.”

“Alright. But the offer’s there.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Tim said. More corporate idiocy sounded like torture, but at least Jack knew Tim did better with more complicated projects. If it weren’t for all the meetings, legalese, and social BS, business could actually be fun. Alas, it was complicated by the human agenda. “Do you *have* to come back to Gotham? You know Mom and I get along better over the Internet.”

Janet nodded emphatically.

Jack sighed. “I know, kiddo, but DI is having a business summit and I couldn’t move it to Singapore like I usually do. We’ll be in Gotham no matter what, so at least let me spend some time with you while I’m there. I miss you, son.”

Oh no, that was Jack’s Sad Voice. Tim was powerless against it, just like Janet. He felt a sad, achy feeling well up in the Jack-shape hole in his heart. He was a pro at ignoring it—video calls went a long way—but he missed his dad’s scent and the way he squeezed Tim in anaconda hugs.

“Fine, I guess we can make this work,” Tim said. “But we’re doing it under duress.”

“Extreme duress,” Janet said, glaring at her mate, but without her usual heat.

When Jack was sad, they all were. He wasn’t meant to be anything other than happy. It ruined the balance of the universe. It was a shame they all loved each other so much. The three of them were locked in a constant tug-of-war.

“Thanks, Tim,” Jack said. “You too, Jan. I know this is hard for both of you. Now, back to planning. Tim, would you rather go to the movies for your birthday, or go on a nature walk? There’s a river trail being built in Bludhaven that’s *gorgeous* as long as you ignore the dead bodies in the water, but there’s also a new horror movie with mutant crocodiles I think you’d like coming out that weekend . . .”

Tim leaned against his desk and listened to his dad prattle about vacation spots and local attractions. On the other side of the screen, Janet leaned against Jack’s shoulder with a look of fond

exasperation.

There were only a couple more weeks until they arrived, then they'd be in Gotham through August. After that, Tim didn't know when he'd see his dad in person again.

The sad, achy feeling got worse, which was disgusting. Tim hated feeling things. It made everything much more difficult, especially when thinking about the future.

Tim didn't like to look ahead. He was good at solving cases and doing detective work, but in his personal life he tended to live in the present. What he'd be doing in five to ten years was a mystery to him, and one he *didn't* want to solve. Mostly, because it meant thinking about how things would change.

Dragons aged slowly, but Tim's development was all over the place. In theory, he'd have a couple more molts before reaching adulthood, but he didn't know when they'd occur, or how they'd affect things with his parents. There was a chance that eventually, Jack and Janet wouldn't be able to come back to Gotham at all.

Suddenly, being on different screens felt very lonely. It was healthier this way—with much less maiming—but being away from Jack still felt *wrong*.

But maybe, for a little while, Tim wouldn't have to be.

"Hey, Dad," Tim said, interrupting Jack's complaints about the museum's latest exhibit. "I think I know what I want for my birthday this year."

"Oh, what is it?" Jack asked, delighted.

Tim drummed his fingers against the table. "Well, um . . ."

He took a deep breath. He didn't usually ask for things, but this was an exception. He really hoped it'd be possible.

He steadied himself and, for the first time he could remember, asked his parents for a present.

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile, in the Batcave:

Bruce: Dick, are you awake?
Dick: Wha…? Yes! Wait, you're not Gordon.
Bruce: … Do you need to go to bed?
Dick: No, I just need an energ---
Bruce *frantically shushes him*
Dick: ...a non-caffeinated substance.
Bruce: Thank you. Certain words are now banned in the manor.
Dick: What even happe—Actually, I don't want to know. What's up?
Bruce: I found Ivy.
Dick: Ok, I'm awake for real now. You're serious?
Bruce: Yes. Go get Tim, I think it's time we paid her a visit.

Meanwhile, Poison Ivy, binging rom-coms in her greenhouse: Why didn't Elle Woods go out with Vivian? Wasted opportunity there.
Plants *nod*

Other notes:

✨Maple Syrup –--you can technically buy it year round in the States, but all the local farms in Upstate NY have a "Maple Weekend" where they sell the good, high-grade stuff once a year. It's weather dependent, but locals take it seriously because that stuff if liquid gold. (Move over, Vermont. You can pry my Grade B out of my cold, dead hands.)

✨Tim's peanut butter sardine sandwich--- I need to try this, because it actually sounds good...minus the marshmallow spread. That's better with bananas and maple cream.

✨Another family emergency has occurred. Youngest Sibling is now officially taller than me. What cruel torture is this? Haven't I suffered enough? 😭

Pride Comes Before The Fall

Chapter Summary

The Bats pay Ivy a visit.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay! I finished an original novel last week and have been proofing it/sending it to betas (waves at Ravengranger and The StoryVerse).

✨IMPORTANT! ✨ Someone's selling ACE DRAGON PINS. We manifested the dragon support pins, people! 🥳
https://prideknights.com/en-us/pages/enamel-pins
(Pride Knights also has aro, bi, trans, and a bunch of other LGBTQIA pins. We can all be dragons.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim wrinkled his nose as Bruce paced the cave, going over their pollen antidotes for the fourth time.

“Remember, onset symptoms happen within seconds,” Bruce said. “If you can identify which strain Ivy’s using, use one of the specialized cures. If not, take the general dose. It should numb the reaction long enough for us to get you to the cave.”

“I know, B,” Tim said as he poked his utility belt. The bandoleer pockets were full to bursting, “but I won’t get hit. Robin’s a pro at evasion.”

Tim had the record for least on the job injuries of all Robins, thanks to a childhood ducking Janet’s swipes. He’d never been exposed to any of the rogues’ chemical cocktails. (Although that was mostly due to never seeing Scarecrow in person, the Joker being in jail for most of his tenure, and Ivy generally ignoring him. But the point stood.)

“Pride comes before the fall,” Dick said from where he was color coding Cass’s vials, so she didn’t have to worry about reading labels. “You just jinxed yourself.”

“No I didn’t,” Tim said, “I’m just stating facts.”

Dick rubbed his eyes, which were still bloodshot. “So was I.”

Tim stepped closer, hands outstretched in case Dick fell over. “Are you *sure* you don’t want to stay home?”

“Look dead,” Cass said, gesturing at Dick’s eye bags. “Like Jason.”

Dick had spent all day pacing the manor, muttering in Romani. Tim was learning the language, but all he’d caught was Dick hissing something about revenge, justice, and emotional support tabloids.

Apparently, the commissioner had asked him to cover someone else’s shift this weekend, in addition to the overtime he was already doing. No wonder Dick looked ready to throw on his Discowing suit and become Gotham’s latest rogue.

“I’ll be fine,” Dick said, grinning too wide for comfort. “A few hours on the streets is just what I need after today.”

“Right,” Tim said, retreating back to Bruce to tuck himself under the batman cape. “Are you done being a mother hen?”

“I’m not overeacting. Ivy’s been spotted by Robinson Park,” Bruce grunted as he checked his antidotes *again.* “We need to be prepared.”

“Fine, whatever.” Tim sighed. He loved Bruce’s compulsive need to make contingencies for everything, but it sucked when it delayed Tim’s crime fighting hobby. “I have all my cures good to go.”

Dick clapped Tim’s shoulder. “Great, then let’s head out. If we play our cards right, she might even go back to Arkham on her own.”

He steered Tim and Cass toward the Batmobile. Cass dragged her feet, since she was texting Kon, spamming him with heart emojis. Tim wondered how much money Superboy had sunk into their dates so far. Poor clone guy.

“Why would Ivy want to go back to Arkham?” Tim asked as Bruce revved the engine. “That place sucks. They don’t even had good interior design.”

It was no wonder people stayed insane when they got admitted. If Tim had to stare at blank concrete walls all day, he’d start singing The Hearse Song and plotting themed-scavenger hunts too.

“Ivy only had six months left on her sentence before release,” Dick reminded Tim. “She was making good progress. Last we checked, she was excited to be declared legally sane again so she could partner with WE for a green energy initiative. The fact she left is *weird.*”

“We need to reevaluate her threat level,” Bruce growled.

Which was Bruce-ese for “this is a wellness check.”

Tim sighed and plonked his head against the back of his seat. “So, we might not even get to fight anyone? Boring. Can I skip this one? Jason said he’s going to torture someone. That sounds more fun.”

Cass punched his shoulder. “No kill people.”

“But—”

“Robinson Park is Ivy’s playground,” Bruce said. “Cornering her will take all four of us. You can patrol alone afterward, but you will *not* help Jason murder anybody.”

Cass looked unjustly smug.

“I hope Ivy puts up a fight at least,” Tim scowled, pressing his cheek against the window. “Nothing’s worse than a dull night on the job.”

***

Tim wanted to retract his earlier statement. There were much worse things than being bored.

The first on the list was being a hostage. It was humiliating.

“Well, well, well, looks like we have a cuckoo.” Ivy said as she stalked toward him. “I thought I told everyone bats weren’t allowed in my neck of the woods.”

Tim stopped trying to gnaw on the vines and glared at his captor.

The plan had been simple: split up, scout Robinson Park, and locate Ivy. Bruce wanted to talk her down instead of fight, but Tim and Cass had been excited to fight plants. (Cass because they were cute, and Tim because he was allowed to eat them.)

Unfortunately, Tim had been caught snooping outside one of Ivy’s old greenhouses, and her dumb, sentient plants grabbed him while he was distracted by the rom-com playing on the TV he’d seen through the window.

Now, he was tied up by a bunch of plants. The vines were so tight that Tim didn’t dare transform in case he hurt himself, and he couldn’t reach his comm.

“You’re going to pay for this, Ivy,” Tim said, wriggling like a caterpillar, with about as much dignity. “Being tied up is not as fun as the Internet makes it sound.”

He didn’t know why some criminals were so into it. Weirdos.

Ivy crossed her arms. “You’re not allowed to say that sentence ever again, sprout. You’re practically a baby. Doesn’t Batman have parental controls on your account?”

“I’m fifteen!” Tim said, offended.

He hadn’t grown a single centimeter since his molt, but he radiated maturity and wisdom. He was obviously too powerful to be contained by something as banal and weak as parental controls. Ivy needed to get her eyes checked.

“I don’t have time to babysit Batman’s toddlers,” Ivy said, running her hand through her hair. Several leaves and a candy wrapper fell out of it. “I have things to deal with.”

“Like personal hygiene?” Tim said.

He wasn’t the cleanest person, but even he had standards. Ivy looked as put together as a dumpster after a frat party. Her hair was tangled, her usual bodysuit had been replaced with sweatpants, and her eyes had more bags than Dick’s.

Ivy scowled, and the vines got a little tighter. “Like showing the greedy one percent the error of their ways. They need to pay for what they’ve done to planet earth.”

Tim looked back at the greenhouse. “You were watching *Clueless.* ”

That was hardly a dastardly deed.

“I can take a night off!” she snapped.

Tim narrowed his eyes. Ivy had a sickly pallor to her skin like she wasn’t getting enough photosynthesis, her eyes had a manic spark, and her shirt had ice cream stains.

Suspicious.

Suspicious and *familiar.*

“Are you on a post-breakup binge?” Tim asked.

Ivy blanched. “No.”

“You are,” Tim gasped, the pieces coming together.

“I’m not!”

“Liar!”

Tim had seen this before. After Babs dumped him as Robin, Dick had haunted Gotham with his Taylor Swift playlists, endless ice-cream binges, and manic need to purge the city on a crusade for justice while he coped.

Ivy was doing the exact same thing, just rogue-flavored.

“Gross,” Tim muttered, eying her with new disdain. “I thought you were a plant person, not a people person.”

Disgusting. He bet she liked reality TV, just like Dick and Babs.

Ivy grabbed him by the collar. Tim yelped as she lifted him off the ground with one arm. Ivy was a lot taller than he’d realized, and had guns to rival Charlotte.

“Listen here you little punk,” Ivy said. Her breath smelled like Cherry Garcia. “I am *not* getting over someone. I don’t need anyone in my life, much less perfect, amazing, beautiful women with smiles like sunshine and hair like spun gold.”

Tim gagged. Would it be worth it to spit acid in her eyes? Bruce would be mad if Tim permanently blinded her, but if he wiped the venom off quickly it wouldn't go through Ivy's skull, and she'd stop muttering about her crush.

"I'm *fine*," Ivy continued, shaking him a little. "Better than fine. I don't need romance, happiness, or a beautiful wife to come home to. I'll be alone forever, and it'll be *great*."

Tim would've agreed, except Ivy started sniffling. Her own statement had done psychic damage.

Yeah, worth it.

"I can't believe I was excited to fight you," Tim mumbled. So much for an exciting patrol.

Sadly, Nightwing burst into the clearing before Tim could pool enough saliva in his mouth.

"Oh, thank God," Dick said when he saw Tim. "You weren't answering your comms, bud. Oh, hi, Dr. Isley."

"Nightwing." Ivy swore and grabbed Tim, restraining him with a chokehold as she glared at Dick.

"Yeah, that's me. I'd ask how it's hanging," Dick said slowly, eyes flickering over the swarm of sentient plants, the vines restraining Tim, and Ivy's disaster appearance, "but you seem pretty tied up."

"I hate you," Tim, currently tied up, said.

When he got home, he was burying all of Dick's Lucky Charms in the rose bushes.

"Back off, Boy Wonder," Ivy growled. "Take one step closer, and your birdy gets it."

Tim tested the vines on his wrists again. The plants tightened, just to spite him.

“Hey, no need for that,” Dick said. He put both hands up. “We can talk this out. There’s no need to hurt my cute little baby brother.”

“You didn’t need to use those adjectives,” Tim muttered. He was fearsome, not cute.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Ivy said, squeezing Tim’s neck, but not too tight. He felt more like a stuffed animal than a hostage.

Dick winced. “You say that, but . . .”

“We saw you visiting multiple gay bars over the last couple weeks,” Tim said, trying to saw through the vines with one of his stealthily-transformed claws. “I can’t believe you busted out of jail just to drool over people. You’re so cringe.”

She used to be so cool, blowing up factories and making pod people to impersonate CEOs. How the mighty had fallen.

“That’s not what I—” Ivy looked ready to strangle him, which was a much healthier emotion than the stress she’d been oozing until now. “It’s not my fault the female form is perfection, okay? Put the blame on God, like it belongs. And I’m allowed to look, even if I’m destined to die alone and unrequited.”

Tim snorted. Humans were *not* all they were cracked up to be. Dragons were the perfect lifeforms. Silly, emotional bipeds didn’t come close.

“Shut up,” Ivy hissed at him. “At least pretend to be scared. You’re a terrible hostage.”

“Well, you’re a worse captor,” Tim said. He wasn’t whining. He was in pain from having to listen to her cry over pretty girls. It was torture. Pure, evil torture. “You haven’t even tried to murder me.”

“I don’t *want* to. You’re like, five—”

“Ivy, let the boy go,” Bruce growled as he stepped out of the shadows. “There’s no need for dramatics.”

Tim perked up. A wild Batman appeared! Maybe tonight wasn’t a complete wash.

“No need?” Ivy squawked. “You’re invading my home!”

“It’s a public park,” Bruce said, looming beside Nightwing, whose smile had turned into a grimace.

Tim felt warm and fuzzy. Robins in danger made both of them turn on the intimidation. Too bad they didn’t do it more often. Wasted opportunity. He’d have to make a PowerPoint about this.

“Semantics,” Ivy snapped. “I’ll let your weird little sidekick go when you leave me the hell alone. Back off, or I start blasting.”

Several giant flowers raised their stalks, petals closed in tight buds.

“I understand you are experiencing . . . Something,” Bruce said, like he was pulling teeth. “But endangering people is not the answer. Come back to Arkham, Dr. Isley. You were doing so well. Don’t throw away your progress.”

It was a good speech. Bruce deserved a gold star for expressing emotions so well.

Ivy straightened and tightened her choke hold. Tim gagged as his airways were abruptly cut off. “No! I’m not going back to Arkham. You can’t make me! Sanity isn’t worth another six months in that hell.”

“Ivy,” Dick began. “It’s not hell. It’s a therapy program that was *working.* There’s even new faculty —”

“Don’t mansplain to me,” Ivy said. “I’m the one who had to live there!”

Tim coughed. He couldn’t breathe. Note to self, being a hostage resulted in block airways and emotional damage.

It would’ve been funny to see Dick and Bruce try to talk feels with Ivy, except it *wasn’t.* Tim came here for a fight, and a fight he was going to get. He’d avenge his damaged ears or die trying.

Tim cut the vines on his wrists with a claw, and slammed his elbow into Ivy’s ribs. She wheezed from the hit, and doubled over enough for Tim to bite her arm. Hard.

“You little—!” Ivy gasped.

Tim spat out her weird, veggie-burger blood and dove onto the grass as Bruce lunged forward with a batarang.

The clearing exploded into a park-wide fight. Ivy dodged Bruce and kicked him in the jaw, who judo-flipped her into the dirt, only for a tree to knock him back, while a hundred other plants woke up and got their thorns out.

“I guess peace was never an option,” Dick said, frying a flytrap with his escrima before it ate him. “You alright, Robby?”

Tim popped up and ripped the rest of the vines off. He chucked a can of weedkiller onto the ground to kill the grass trying to tangle his shoes. “Hunky dory. Where’s Black Bat?”

“Distracted by a possum,” Dick sighed. “You know how she is.”

Tim nodded. Odds were Cass would smuggle the animal home to introduce to her pet rats. Bruce didn't know about them yet, but Tim and Steph had a running bet how long it'd take him to notice. If he didn't figure it out by Christmas, Tim had Cass' permission to eat all the animals.

The fight was fun but annoying. Fun, because Tim got to bite and spit acid on the plants. Annoying, because he had to stay human-shaped, which meant he couldn't breathe fire on them. Maintaining his cover was a curse sometimes.

While Tim took care of the plants, Bruce and Dick tag-teamed Ivy. They were still trying to deescalate her, but Ivy was drowning them out with violence.

"—really think you should keep attending therapy instead of going back to bioterrorism," Dick said as Ivy tried to whip him with a strand of thorns. "There's more than one way to cope, but this definitely isn't a good one. Why don't we all calm down before we do something we regret?"

"Calm down? And let you take me back to *purgatory,* forced to hide my feelings from the world?" Ivy screeched, dodging a strike from Bruce. "Never! Let's see how *you* like uncontrollable urges."

She snapped her fingers. A giant flower unfurled behind Batman.

"B!" Tim gasped.

He flung himself in front of his human, all rational thought gone. All he knew was that Bruce wasn't allowed to get hurt.

Tim expected a giant vine to whip him, or a tree branch to break his ribs.

Instead, the flower coughed a dusty cloud, and a fistful of pollen hit him straight in the face.

Chapter End Notes

RIP to Ivy. Tim is the wrong person to talk feels with. She should've had a nice evening eating ice cream with Nightwing while he patted her on the shoulder. Alas, she caught a dragon in a

mouse trap.

Meanwhile, Cass:

Cass: Come. Be Mini-Black-Bat.
Feral Possum *hisses*
Cass: Aww, just like Timmy.

Speaking of Tim. I tried the Tim Special!

Ingredients:
-Ciabatta bread
-Thai peanut butter sauce (with hot sauce for flavor)
-large sardines
-mini-marshmallows

My brother and I each made an 8-inch sub for ourselves, roasted under the broiler. I give it a 6/10, for being a filling meal that tasted good. The gooey marshmallows had a nice texture, and the PB and bread went well together. Next time, we're going to buy mini sardines (petingas, with the heads still attached) for a better crunch and a better fish-to bread ratio.

This is also where I mention my parents said they want to try it too, but my dad doesn't want to add artichoke hearts like I do. For being the person I get my taste in food from, he lacks vision. :(

Side Effects May Include

Chapter Summary

Tim: Object permanence? Who's she?

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU to Ravengranger for betaing. We both got hit by formatting issues, so it was a special hell. Thanks for going the extra mile!

Two updates in one week? Amazing--but wait, there's more! Jason now has a POV fic in the series! If you liked his endnote sage back in the beginning of the fic, "Meanwhile, In Nanda Parbat" (part 3 of the series) has an extended plot of what went down during his Lost Days. If you want to read 8k of a manic, Post-Lazarus Jason chewing on the furniture, I recommend you check it out. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim collapsed like a puppet with his strings cut.

“Oh, shit,” Ivy said.

Tim wanted to tell her to watch her language (Alfred was a stickler about that), but he felt weird. *Really* weird. All fuzzy and prickly, like dryer lint full of needles. He tried to take a deep breath, but sneezed as he smelled the gritty, floral scent of whatever was circulating through his lungs.

“—did you do to him?” Someone was saying. Was that one of his humans? Why was he being so loud? “That better not be the 18+ pollen, or I’ll make flat-lining the Joker look like a party joke.”

“I’m not using that pollen anymore!” Someone not-Tim’s said, sounding queasy. “You think I want to make people feel unwanted attraction *now?”*

Tim sneezed again, eyes watering. His skin was numb, and his muscles ached. Transforming usually helped, but that sounded hard, and he wasn’t supposed to change shape . . . right? There

were rules about that. Tim just couldn't remember them very well.

"Which one is it, Ivy?" the best voice *ever* said.

Tim tried to sit up. He liked that voice. It was gruff and angry and perfect. He needed to catch it and stick it in a bottle so he could shake it when he wanted to hear it again. Who did it belong to? Tim *knew* he knew. It was on the tip of his tongue.

He cracked his eyes open and squinted at the dark blob threatening a green blob. "B?"

The black blob twitched but didn't get closer. There were a bunch of plants in the way. Tim pouted and tried to get up again. He succeeded in sitting, finally, but wobbled dangerously to the side.

"—any idea what you've done?" the blue blob said, looking ready to tear their hair out. "Of all the people to dose, you had to pick—oh crap. This is so bad."

Tim licked the air. It tasted like panic and flowers. His skin started to itch.

"Why are you freaking out so much? It's just cuddle pollen," Green blob said. Green blob had a name. Tim knew she had a name. It was plant-something. But a bad plant. Like, Poison Oak or something.

"Enough games, Ivy," Best Voice On The Planet sounded mad. That wasn't good. "Fix him, or you'll regret it."

"Get a new threat, Batman. It won't work on me." Thousands of leaves rustled, and branches snapped even though it wasn't windy.

"He's having an atypical reaction—" Blue blob said.

"Boo hoo, it'll wear off in a few hours. Looks like he'll just have to spend the night with your army of accomplished chemists while you figure out the side effects. Not my problem. Toodle-oo."

“Ivy!” Best Voice swore. “Nightwing, look after Robin. I can’t let her get away.”

“B, wait—”

There was the sound of a big, important chase sequence and people crashing through the underbrush. Tim’s eyes drifted shut. He flopped back onto the grass as the world spun. He couldn’t keep track of anything, nor did he want to.

His limbs were starting to get feeling back, but they were *icky* feelings. He wanted to scratch his skin off. Did pollen trigger molts? Tim didn’t think he was due for another one for a long time. His dragon form still had a lot of growing to do before he had to shed.

Stupid molts. They were the worst part of being a dragon.

“Hey, little buddy,” the blue blob said, squatting next to him. “Can you tell me how you feel? I’ve got plenty of antidotes, but we don’t want to get the wrong one.”

The blue blob smelled like latex and sugar. Tim blinked sleepily. He smelled like home.

“ . . . Dick?” he said quietly, as every pore on his body burned.

“That’s me, but code names only,” Dick said. “Symptoms?”

Tim wrinkled his nose. Now that he recognized his human, it was easier to focus. He could hear shouting in the background, felt his skin itching like he had scabies, and smelled so much perfume in the air that he wanted to vomit.

“Bad,” he settled on. That about summed it up. “Where’s B?”

“He’s right over—” Dick looked around the now empty clearing. “Crap. He’s gone. Ivy must have run for the hills. Don’t worry, he’ll catch her. She’s not going to get far with Black Bat still out there.”

Dick said some other stuff, but Tim hadn’t heard anything past *he’s gone.*

Gone?

Bruce was gone?

But that wasn’t allowed. Bruce was one of Tim’s treasures. He had to stay with him so Tim could protect him properly. Treasure wasn’t allowed to wander off. It didn’t make sense! The only reason Tim’s precious things wouldn’t be in sight would be if they were dead.

Tim’s stomach shriveled.

Was Bruce dead? Was that what Dick meant by gone? Did—did Tim lose his favorite human?

Tim choked. His on-fire skin was the least of his worries now.

“Woah, hey, Robin, what’s wrong? Breathe, buddy,” Dick said. “Rob—”

Tim continued hyperventilating. He couldn’t afford to breathe right now. He had to find out who killed B and *tear them to pieces.* Nobody was allowed to touch his hoard. That was against the rules. Tim couldn’t lose another hoard member, not after—

The full agony of losing Bruce hit him like a 16 wheeler of grief. It ran him over, then hit reverse. Tim didn’t even pretend to fight it.

He crumpled against the grass and sobbed.

Distantly, he heard someone talking. They sounded panicked—frightened, even—but all Tim could think about was the fiery burning in his heart. It was worse than the prickly awfulness on his skin. That felt like animals chewing on him like a toy, but it was nothing compared to the ache of losing his favorite person.

He screamed into the grass and scratched his arms, but someone yanked his fingers away from his arms before he could do any damage. Strong arms lifted him up and pressed him against someone's chest.

"Rob, please, you're going to hurt yourself—"

Tim screeched louder but couldn't get his lungs to listen to him. He needed to get angry—that was how he was supposed to react—but his body wasn't listening to him.

Someone pinned his arms to his chest, but Tim couldn't remember who it was anymore. All he knew was that they were stopping him from doing something, and he *hated* it, even though where they touched him didn't hurt. It actually felt very nice . . . but nice things weren't allowed to exist when Bruce was dead.

Tim gave up and went limp, hiccupping on his tears as they soaked the turf. His world was water in his eyes and fire in his skin, and nothing would make it better.

Whoever held him was muttering soothing words, but it was white noise on a busy street. Tim didn't bother deciphering it.

Eventually, something cold pricked his arm, and a chilly sensation drifted through his veins up toward his heart. Tim had the faint thought that it should help with the burning, but it didn't.

Tim just sobbed harder.

He hadn't cried like this since last year on the docks. He hadn't cried *at all* since then, but now he was choking on his emotions. He coughed so hard it felt like his stomach was crawling out his throat, and he started to retch.

“Shit, shit,” the Not-Bruce person said. “That didn’t work. Okay, the general dose, then.”

There was another prick, and the itchiness in Tim’s skin faded slightly. Numbness spread through his limbs like he’d been dumped in an ice bath, and the fire banked slightly.

Tim’s teeth chattered. The cold made him syrupy, but it was better than the burning.

Once his breathing started to even out, the mystery person lifted him up and started walking. Tim’s legs hung off someone’s hips as he was carried somewhere. A hand gave him gentle head scratches.

“—going to be okay, Timmy, I promise,” they were saying. “We’re going home, and in a few days, this will just be a funny story to laugh over. Got it?”

Tim sniffled and shook his head. “N’t funny. Bruce’s *gone.”*

Clarity started to return. Tim blinked salt out of his eyes. Black-and-blue body armor was the first thing he saw.

“Just for a little while,” Dick—it was *Dick*—said. “He’s catching Ivy, remember? Cass is helping him. You got cuddle-pollened, pal. But it looks like dragons don’t react the same way as humans.”

Cuddle pollen? Tim buried his face into Dick’s shoulder. Cuddle-pollen was supposed to make him want evil, hateful hugs, not *murder his humans.* Ivy’s new strain sucked. As soon as Dick let go, Tim was hunting her down to melt her like the Wicked Witch of the West.

Except . . . he really didn’t want to let go of Dick. Dick smelled like home, and *he* wasn’t dead. Not to mention, everywhere Dick’s skin touched his felt like sunshine on cobblestones. It took the cold *and* the burning away.

“Don’t die too, Dick,” Tim said, squeezing him as hard as he could to stop him from disappearing. “You’re not allowed.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Dick wheezed. “And nobody’s dead.”

“Yes, they are. They’re *gone.”*

Dick was the only one near Tim. Ergo, he was the only one real and alive, because Tim couldn’t smell or hear his other humans. And if they weren’t with him, clearly he’d failed to keep them safe.

A hoard would never leave its dragon, otherwise.

A new wave of despair washed over him. Tim couldn’t even begin to capture how awful he felt. Silent tears rolled down his cheeks. No Babs? Steph? Cass? Alfie? He wanted to die. If he’d failed to protect his hoard, it was what he deserved.

“They’re not dead,” Dick said frantically. He stumbled over some roots. “You left them in your nest, remember? We’re going back to the manor, and you can cuddle with all of us as long as you want.”

Nest?

Tim had been so panicked he’d forgotten he had one of those.

“They’re really there?” Tim croaked. Hope blossomed in the void of his heart.

“I promise on the Kellogg brand,” Dick said, which was more binding than a geas. “Nobody’s dead. You’re just suffering a *very* bad reaction to hostile plant life. Everyone is right where you left them. God, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cry. Jason wasn’t kidding when he said it’s like watching puppies drown.”

Dick rubbed soothing circles on Tim’s back, but Tim tensed like he’d just been electrocuted.

“Jason,” Tim whispered.

In the murky haze of his brain, Tim clung to Dick's statement like a drowning man to driftwood. Jason was alive. Bruce was ok. Everybody was fine, and as soon as they reached the Batmobile, Tim could go home and verify that for himself.

There was only one problem: *Jason didn't live in the nest.*

"Tim? Tim, talk to me. We're almost to the Batmobile. You just need to hang on a little longer."

Tim couldn't protect Jason if he was so far away. Something bad could happen and Tim wouldn't know until it was too late. Jason could *die.*

"Tim?"

That wasn't allowed to happen. He needed to fix this. *Now.*

Dick was still talking. Tim ignored the meaningless words and nerve-struck Nightwing's trapezius to escape the octopus hug.

"Ow! Tim, what're you—"

They were by the Batmobile, and the back door had already been opened. Tim shoved Dick into it and slammed the door shut.

"Tim!"

Tim darted away from his human. His brain screamed to take Dick with him, but Nightwing was wriggly and would slow him down. Tim forced the screechy dragon part of his brain down and fumbled for the remote start for the Batmobile on his wrist computer. He clicked the "home" button and relaxed as he heard the autopilot start.

The sound of a window breaking was less soothing.

"*Robin Robinson Bat, get back here!"* Dick screeched as he tried to break out of Batman's armored sedan.

Tim ignored him and stumbled back into the woods, focusing on what he had to do.

His skin screamed at him, half-numb but still sensitive. The general dose had only dampened the side effects, not eliminated them. The ghost of Dick's touch made every second worse. Tim shoved that down too, even though doing so felt like throwing himself onto an electric fence.

There wasn't time to hurt. He had to find his human. That was all that mattered.

Tim coughed out a mouthful of smoke as he tried to focus his senses. Sparks ignited on a pile of dead leaves. It smelled like autumn and fireworks, but it wasn't the right smell.

Jason's scent was like books and gunpowder. Tim had to find it so he could bring him home. But Robinson Park smelled like plants and garbage. Where would Jason be?

Tim hardly had to think the question before he knew the answer.

He ignored the burning agony in his skin (it wasn't nearly as bad as molting) and shifted into his dragon form.

He almost collapsed from vertigo, but he shook it off and jumped into the air.

Gotham, constantly smoggy with pollution, always had low-hanging clouds and pillars of steam to hide in. Tim vanished into them, and the cold water helped shock him awake.

The last thing he saw was the pile of burned leaves grow larger and envelope a small corner of the park, and the Batmobile screech to a halt as Dick no doubt overrode the autopilot.

That wasn't good. Tim had to hurry so he could get Dick back home too. Otherwise, his humans would keep throwing themselves in danger without Tim there to protect them.

But first, Jason.

Tim beelined to Crime Alley and dive-bombed a library.

***

Tim loved nature documentaries, particularly *The Life of Birds,* because David Attenborough was an international treasure. Even better, Tim and birds were (very) distant cousins by way of the dinosaurs, so they had things in common.

Like diving.

Once he spotted Jason's base, Tim let himself fall like a peregrine falcon, aiming for the pinprick of a window on the fourth floor. Tim was great at fitting through tight openings, but this landing took precision skill.

It was only when Tim was a hundred feet from impact that he realized his dragon body wouldn't fit through the hole.

Good thing quick transformations were also part of his skill set.

Tim did the quickest shift ever, and he burst through the glass in a ball of human desperation, tucking and rolling when he hit the ground at high speed. Glass and concrete scraped his back, but the Robin uniform was reinforced almost as well as the Batsuit. Tim would have a couple bruises, but nothing else.

He rolled to a stop in a shower of glass in the middle of a room full of gangsters. Tim caught the flash of guns, leather jackets, and shocked faces, but none of them were the *right* face. The burning in his skin ratcheted up another degree, and Tim couldn't decide whether he wanted to breathe fire on all these Not-His people or start crying again.

“What the hell, Baby Bird,” a mechanical voice said. “What’s going on now?”

Tim would recognize that gruff, emotionally constipated tone anywhere.

He flung himself at Jason and tackled him hard enough to knock the Red Hood off his feet. Tim latched on like a limpet and went boneless as he breathed in the smell of destruction and literature. He was so relieved that Jason was *here* and *real* that he started to purr.

“. . . Boss?”

“Give me a minute.”

Tim got picked up again and was half-dragged out of the room. He heard the door slam shut behind him. But, since Jason was still with him, that didn’t matter. Nothing did except his hoard.

Speaking of which, Tim needed to get said hoard back to his nest.

“—placement, I mean it. Respond, or I’m taking you to Leslie’s,” Jason the Bad Hoard Member was saying. “You’re freaking me out.”

“Gr…ded,” Tim muttered, voice slurred. He was loopy from flying high.

Jason leaned closer. He’d taken his helmet off, so Tim was face-to-face with the whites of his domino. “What was that?”

“I said—” Tim squeezed Jason’s arms, his claws poking holes in the leather jacket. “That you’re *grounded.”*

Jason opened his mouth but had to close it again when Tim yanked him toward the main doors.

“Hey, woah, what’re you—you can’t ground me!” Jason snapped, trying to pull away. “You’re the baby of the family. What is *wrong* with you?”

Tim dug his heels in and yanked harder, making sure to hiss to assert dominance. Jason almost face-planted.

“Boss?” A couple goons stuck their heads out of the meeting room, eying Tim warily. “Do you, uh, need help?”

“No, we’re good,” Jason said, as he lost tug-of-war with Tim. “Keep planning that drug bust, and tell Kevin he can torture the Maroni guy instead of me. I have to take care of this—Robin, *stop.* I’m not going with you. We’re calling Nightwing, since you’re obviously under some kind of influence.”

Tim frowned. Jason was saying no? He didn’t want to go back to the nest? That wasn’t proper hoard behavior.

“You’re mine. You do what I want,” Tim said sternly, only swaying a little bit. “Those are the rules.”

Tim needed Jason where he could protect him, and a ratty library full of stupid people wasn’t it. Bad Jason.

“Boss,” the goon said, squinting at Tim. “You sure you don’t want help?”

“I’m *fine,”* Jason said, but that was obviously a lie. He wasn’t in Tim’s nest, so he couldn’t be fine.

Jason yanked his arm back, and Tim narrowed his eyes. Jason was losing points for this. All the points. And then some extra. Good hoard members did what they were told. They didn’t leave Tim in agony and refuse to do his bidding. Stupid Jason.

What did Janet always say? Living things were tedious. That’s why it was better to make sure they *couldn’t* say no. Jason didn’t need his legs, did he? Those were optional body parts.

Another crash echoed off the walls from an adjacent room.

“What now?” Jason sighed, looking at the ceiling in supplication.

The goons were shoved onto the ground as Nightwing shouldered into the hallway, broken glass in his hair and a new cut on his cheek. About half of Jason’s gang was on his heels, looking unsure if they should start shooting.

“Hood, thank God!” Nightwing gasped. “Tackle him, now. He’s been dosed by Ivy!”

“*He’s been what?”*

Tim would thank Dick later. His arrival distracted everyone just long enough for Tim to trip Jason and shove him into the nearest room before anyone could catch up.

Even better, this room had a window.

“Not again!” Jason yelled, but Tim was already transforming.

This window was big enough for him to break through in dragon form, and Tim was big enough that it was easy-peasy to drag Jason with him. Best of all, he did it so fast nobody could stop him because they were all trapped in the hall.

This would teach Jason to live away from the nest.

***

Tim woke up feeling like he’d taken a shower in acid. His skin was overstimulated and raw, and his brain was full of cotton balls. Even worse, there were people *touching him.*

“Get off,” he groaned, kicking at random. He hit several bodies.

Everyone rolled away, giving Tim space to breathe. He rubbed his arms to get the phantom touches off, shuddering from the ickiness. He’d been exposed to so many Dick-hugs since moving into the manor that he had good resistance, but Tim still didn’t like being touched.

“Is it over?” Jason said, sounding haunted.

Tim cracked his eyes open and glared. For some reason, all the Waynes were dogpiled on Bruce’s bed, looking like they’d just battled a hurricane. Even Alfred was there, although he was in a chair. Tim was, for some reason, holding onto the man’s ankle with bruising strength. He let go and frowned.

Weird.

A big, calloused hand smoothed back Tim’s hair. He wrinkled his nose but pressed back against it like a cat.

“Looks like the pollen wore off,” Bruce said, and he started giving head scratches.

Tim went boneless as Bruce ran a hand over his scalp. This was his favorite thing, although he was a bit confused. What pollen?

“Tim better?” Cass yawned, appearing from under a mountain of blankets.

“More importantly, are we free?” Jason said.

“Yes and yes,” Bruce said.

Tim growled. One of those wasn’t correct.

“You’ll never be free,” Tim said through a yawn. “You’re mine for life. I have dibs.”

That got a lot of chuckles, even though Tim was dead serious.

Tim sat up and blinked the sleep out of his eyes. Bits and pieces of the night before were coming back to him. Ivy’s stupid pollen, crying like a pathetic human, tracking down Jason—

“Did I blow my cover?” Tim asked, squinting at his hands. They were flecked with scales, and his fingers were half -fused into claws. Pollened Tim hadn’t seemed to care about staying one shape.

Dammit. Jack was going to kill him if he’d outed himself.

“Amazingly, no,” Dick said. He was still in the Nightwing suit. Tim probably hadn’t let go of him long enough to change. “You didn’t transform until you threw Jason out a window—classic move, by the way. I’m proud of you. If anyone saw you in the air, they haven’t said anything. Babs has been scanning social media all morning, and nothing’s popped up.”

“Babs? Where is she?” Tim looked around, but she wasn’t in the room.

“She locked herself in the Clocktower once she knew what was happening” Bruce said. “Luckily, we were able to distract you from collecting her and Stephanie.”

“Oh,” Tim said. “Bummer.”

He almost never saw the Waynes under one roof. There were always one or two missing. That was annoying. He wanted his hoard in the same place. Why must they deny him that?

“You’re not allowed near Ivy anymore,” Jason said as he stumbled out of the bed. “My minions think you murdered me and looted my corpse to eat. My phone’s been blowing up all morning.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Tim said.

His hoard was the ultimate treasure. He'd never eat them. That dishonor was only for rival dragons. And looting a corpse? How barbaric. Corpses were meant to be collected. Janet may have eaten her mother, but even she kept the bones polished and on display.

"I know, but they don't," Jason said, trying to comb his hair with his hand. The white stripe stood out like a skunk. "I had to tell them this was just another one of your kidnappings. Damn, my reputation is going to tank."

"Another?" Cass parroted.

Jason waved her off.

Tim flopped backward and pulled a blanket around himself. "Sounds like a you problem."

"This whole situation is *your fault*, Tim," Jason said.

"Be nice. He didn't mean for it to happen, and none of us knew dragons and pollen reacted like this," Dick said. "No victim blaming."

"Ivy apologized as well, once I got her to Arkham," Bruce said.

Everyone talked quietly while Tim curled back into the blankets. He was still tired from sobbing like a pathetic loser all night. The more he remembered, the cringier it got. He'd essentially had an all-night panic attack. He was going to make everyone sign an NDA so this incident was never mentioned again. It would die with him.

"Get some rest, Tim," Bruce said. "We'll be here when you wake up."

"You'd better be," Tim said into the mattress, forcing himself to relax.

Consciousness was overrated. He'd panic over possibly outing his dragonness later. Tim personally didn't care, but Jack would freak out. He worried too much over secret identities for his own good, even though Tim and Janet could handle themselves just fine.

"You have our word, Master Timothy," Alfred said. "But even if you wanted otherwise, I doubt you could get these mother hens to abandon you for long."

"Good," Tim yawned.

Solitude was wonderful until Tim was actually alone.

He'd have to remember that even though he didn't like humans in general, he loved his people. If they were gone, so was everything that mattered.

He was still jittery and awful from the pollen. The only thing that made it worse was if his treasures weren't with him.

Tim would stay as far away from Ivy as possible if it meant he never had to feel that way again.

Chapter End Notes

To keep Tim from destroying the Clocktower to collect his computer-human, the Waynes basically had to tackle Tim and pretend they were hurt so he'd focus on them instead. It was super effective, even though they got pretty squished.

Meanwhile, last night:

Ivy: NO, NO DON'T TAKE ME BACK TO ARKHAM! ANYTHING BUT THAT, PLEASE!
Bruce: You drugged my son and abandoned him while he was having an allergic reaction. Cry me a river.
Ivy: You have every cure for my pollen EVER, I thought he'd be fine . . . Did they not work?
Bruce: No. Nightwing tells me he's sobbing uncontrollably and doesn't remember who we are. I hope you're happy.
Ivy: No . . . I feel really bad.

Bruce: He also burned down half the park.
Ivy: WHAT.

At Arkham:

Ex-director: Hello again, Ms. Isley. Good to have you back. I missed my next-cell neighbor.
Ivy: Bite me, psycho. I need to get out of here.
Gary (in the cell across the hall): Are you still denying your attraction to the lovely doctor? Deception is the filth of the soul. It must be cleansed.
Ivy: I'm not denying anything. I just have crimes to commit outside. That's all.
Ex-director: So, the fact you can't say two sentences to the new director is a coincidence.
Ivy: Exactly!
Ex-director: Uh-huh. And I'm legally sane.
Gary: I saw you writing poetry for her. What was it about, her milky skin and red lips?
Ivy: Shut up.
Ex-director: Ah, young love. Don't worry, we support you. And with luck, Dr. Quinzel will fall head over heels for you and break HIPA laws so I can get my job back.
Ivy: I need to get out of here.

Harley/Joker? I'm sorry, they never met. ;)

A Spoonful Of Spite Helps The Lecture Go Down

Chapter Summary

Lucius: It has come to my attention that you're a menace.
Tim: *gasp* Who has been telling you these lies?

Chapter Notes

Writing this fic by like:

Part 1: Super manic happy fun time. NO thoughts, only vibes.
Part 2: Fun little episodes while Jason is unhinged in the background.
Part 3: Lots of feels and playing hot potato with the plot.
Part 4: twenty open tabs, thirteen subplots, set up for future chapters, balancing character arcs, making multiple timelines to keep the pacing on track, editing five sections at once--

Part 5 is going to murder me when it comes. T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next few days, Tim kept at least one of his humans within arm's reach at all times. The pollen was out of his system, but his skin still crawled from too many cuddles and not enough of them. His body couldn't decide how to process physical touch, and he hated it.

Tim also couldn't shake the fear that if he couldn't see his humans that they'd vanish from existence. The only thing he could trust were his senses, so his humans needed to stay close.

Dick was *very* pleased by this. Tim had gotten more hugs in the last two days than in a year, which was ridiculous since Dick was naturally affectionate to begin with. If this had happened to Tim a couple of years ago, he'd have fled to the wilderness to escape the cuddles. It was only recently that he was getting comfortable with being hugged by his hoard so often. Before that, touch had been unpleasant.

"I have dibs on eating Ivy," Tim said on day three. An empty tissue box was on the couch cushion next to him. His nose still sensitive from the pollen. "She deserves to pay."

“You do need more veggies in your diet, but you’re not allowed to munch on her,” Dick said, cuddling with Tim. “Bruce got her back to Arkham, her therapy plan has been adjusted, and all’s well that ends well.”

“Not for me,” Tim grumbled. Bruce believed in reform the way kids believed in Santa, but Tim wanted justice. Getting high on cuddle pollen would be his villain origin story.

Dick ruffled his hair. “Don’t worry, little buddy, there are plenty of other things for you to chew on.”

Tim sighed. Once again, Dick missed the point.

He turned back to the nature documentary they were binging. It was a new Netflix series about a dragon enthusiast that had yeeted himself into the Russian wilderness to capture the elusive creatures on film. The guy’s information wasn’t accurate at all, but he had the spirit.

Unfortunately, “spirit” didn’t do much good against aggressive, territorial animals that loved playing cat and mouse with their prey.

The dragon enthusiast found that out the hard way. It was a found footage documentary.

“I’m really glad they cut the last ten minutes of this,” Dick said queasily, as the narrator realized he was being hunted by the creature he sought to find. “What’s the rating?”

“Ratings are just letters, they don’t mean anything,” Tim said, giggling as the man onscreen tried to find a way to escape the valley he’d wandered into, only to find it blocked by fallen trees covered in claw marks.

Silly human. He’d been herded exactly where the dragon wanted him. Too bad the movie didn’t end properly. The guy dropped his camera before the dragon chased him back to its hoard and ate him. Odds were that the man’s bones were hung up nice and pretty as a warning for others to stay away.

Lovely.

This was the representation Tim had been waiting for his entire life. He couldn't wait to tell Janet about it.

"This is why we don't let you pick the films on movie night," Dick said with a sigh. "Between this and the Saw franchise, you've got an alarming taste in cinema."

"Jigsaw is funny," Tim said. "I want to smash his wooden head and make a diorama out of it."

Aside from horror and found footage, Tim mostly watched nature documentaries. Anything else, he had to be coerced into watching during hoard time. If there wasn't excessive violence or tons of animals, what was the point? *The Lord of the Rings* had been awesome though. Totally worth being held hostage for.

Dick sighed again. "At least you're cuddly right now. That's a perk."

He squeezed Tim like a teddy bear, then went back to texting the Titans. Tim caught the words "Operation Final Girl" before the TV grabbed his attention again, whatever that meant.

***

It took a week total for the last dregs of the pollen to go away. As soon as Tim could stand being away from his nest for more than an hour, he was back at his internship. Bruce had taken Jack's advice to heart and was looking for more challenging projects for Tim, but for now it was mostly still busy work.

Tim already regretted coming in for a half shift today. Bruce's small smile and the promise of hoard time had fooled him. What was the definition of insanity? Because Tim was pretty sure he was embodying it. Corporate stuff was *never* fun.

"Mr. Drake, may I have a word with you?" Lucius said two hours into Tim's suffering.

Tim looked around in surprise, as if there was someone else with his last name wandering the halls. “Me?”

“Did I stutter?” Lucius asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tim blinked. Lucius and Tam looked really similar when they were out of patience. “Uh, sure. Let me finish this.”

He finished reviewing the expense report Bruce had given him. Ten minutes later, Tim slid into Lucius’ office and sat across from the man. It was a lot different than Bruce’s workspace, which was full of Father’s Day gifts from when Dick was a kid, random plants, and random $10,000 doodads to show off to investors. It was a delightful mix of luxury and clutter than made his office both warm and intimidating.

Lucius, meanwhile, had gone so minimalist that Marie Kondo would’ve been impressed. Everything was white finish, black wood, and severe lines that pressed the walls closer together. Tim felt like he was in an interrogation room. All that was missing were the handcuffs.

“Sooo, what did you need me for?” Tim asked. “Is this about that report you wanted me to look over? I said I’d do it tomorrow. Bruce wants me to practice doing expense reports.”

It was an easy project. Too easy. Tim made it funner by not using a calculator. So far, he had zero errors. Math was his minion, easily bent to his will.

“No, none of that.” Lucius rested his elbows on the desk and clasped his hands together, giving Tim an appraising look. “This is about Tamara.”

“Tam?” Tim echoed, glancing at the door. “What about her?”

As far as he knew, Tam was at her desk, squeezing a stressball like it was someone’s neck, just like she did every day.

Lucius pursed his lips. “Timothy, do you know why I gave Tamara this internship?”

Tim paused before answering. He had a feeling the normal answer of “developing business skills” and “gaining experience” weren’t the ones the man was looking for.

“Because you’re mad are her?” Tim said, going for the obvious. “That’s the vibe I’m getting.”

Tam and Lucius fought more than Jason and Bruce. It wasn’t even fun, constructive arguing either, or homicidally driven like Tim and Janet’s spats. It was just mean.

“No, that’s not why,” Lucius said. “Timothy, Tamara is going through a rough time. I’d hoped this summer would be a chance for her to turn her . . . passionate personality . . . Toward some worthwhile goals. I do not appreciate your influence on her.”

“Wait, what did I do?” Tim said.

Lucius unlocked his computer and pulled open a spreadsheet. “There’s no point playing dumb, Timothy. Since meeting you, Tam has turned into a terror. There’ve been six incidents of property damage at WE since you two were introduced, and she’s taken to hissing at me whenever I walk by.”

“That last one isn’t my fault,” Tim said quickly.

The others were. Tam broke that printer (and a few other things in the break room) because Tim needed to escape WE for happy Young Justice fun times. She was always doing him solids like that. But the hissing *wasn’t* because of him. Tam did that before he met her. She just did it more often now.

“My point,” Lucius said, “is that you have goaded her teenage rebellion. As both a father and a member of WE, I am disappointed by this.”

“Have you considered that Tam is “rebelling” for a reason?” Tim said dryly. “And that your boss’s ward *isn’t* responsible for that?”

Tim loved Tam's rage against the world, but he didn't cause it. She had a lot of pent-up, natural aggression. All Tim was guilty of was giving her the occasional excuse to tap into it.

"Don't play games with me, boy," Lucius said. "I've been managing Bruce's company since you were in diapers. You can play innocent all you want, but it doesn't change the fact that you've been infecting Tamara with your disrespect for authority."

"I am hurt and offended by these accusations," Tim said, crossing his arms. "When you brought Tam in you *wanted* me to be friends with her. Now that it's inconvenient for you, you're changing your mind? That's douchey."

Double-standards would be the death of Tim.

"Tamara doesn't need another mark on her record," Lucius said. "Bruce and your parents may be happy to smooth over the trouble you cause, but my daughter has her future at WE to think about. I won't have her stain her reputation with any more of these pranks. From now on, you'll stop encouraging her destruction of company property, understand?"

Tim glared at him. "Fine."

Lucius nodded tersely, then released a long sigh. His shoulders loosened. "Thank you, Timothy. I know this seems severe, but you'll understand when you're my age. Sometimes, a parent needs to be strict."

"Uh huh, sure," Tim said. "Good talk."

He got up and headed toward the door.

"Timothy," Lucius said, making Tim pause in the doorway. "I'm glad you and Tamara are friends. I don't mind if you two continue to interact, just remember—"

“No property damage, rebellion, or anything fun,” Tim said. “Sure thing, Mr. Fox.”

He left the office uncharacteristically grumpy.

Her own good, huh?

Tim was familiar with long-term benefits. He’d spent the first four years of his life under glorified house arrest and was only allowed outside when Jack could guarantee nobody would see him. Mastering his shape-shifting had been a long, arduous process, but Tim understood why the secrecy had been necessary. Jack’s rules—even the ones Tim didn’t like—were there to keep Tim safe. They were extreme sometimes, but Tim never doubted that they came from a place of love.

Lucius obviously loved Tam, but some of his rules were *weird.* Dick said that Lucius was a strict parent, but after hearing Tam vent about her home life enough times Tim felt safe calling the man a helicopter, if not a control freak.

No wonder Tam was spitting mad. Tim hated being told what to do as well.

He narrowed his eyes, then took a detour to Tam’s desk. She was hunched over a folder of meeting minutes, just like Tim had been, and there were sticky notes with To-Do lists everywhere.

“Want me to buy you some time to escape for the day?” he asked, leaning his hip against the desk.

She looked at him warily. “Seriously? Why?”

“I owe you, don’t I?” Tim said. Plus, it’d be a good way to get back at Lucius. Nobody told him off without facing the consequences.

Tam nodded, still suspicious but desperate enough to escape her full-time summer job not to question his motives.

Tim waited until she was in the lobby, then put a wad of tinfoil in the break room's microwave. He was keeping his promise; Tam wasn't destroying property, so Lucius couldn't get mad. Besides, the smell of smoke and fire extinguishers was refreshing, and the office staff could use a refresher on fire safety anyway.

"How's this for a bad influence?" he muttered to himself, very proud.

If he was going to get lectured, he might was well earn it.

Chapter End Notes

Lucius: your child is terrifying the other interns.
Bruce: So's yours.
Lucius:
Bruce:

They can't say anything about the other's problem child because they're both abusing their positions to keep them in their internships. Karma hit a home run with these two, I swear.

Jack and Janet are preparing for their flight back to Gotham in the background. Jack with a big smile, and Janet with gritted teeth.

Meanwhile, at Arkham:

Harley : Really, Ms. Isley. We were making such good progress. Why'd you run?
Ivy: N-No reason, none at all. I just wanted, uh, to commit crimes against humanity.
Harley: Hmm, this whole punishing the many for the crimes of the few agenda is something we need to work on. I know there are things we as a society need to change, but we can find better ways to do that than violence. You wouldn't want to punish me for something a CEO did, right?
Ivy: P-Punish you?
Harley: ... Ms. Isley?
Ivy: I'm sorry, I just blue screened. Is it getting hot in here?
Harley: No?
Ivy: oh, then it's just you--I MEAN, let's do more therapy. That sounds great. I love therapy.
Harley: ...If you say so. I'm glad you're in the mood to chat with lil' ol' me.
Ivy: *Under her breathe* You always put me in the mood.
Harley: What?
Ivy: Nothing! Don't listen to me, Dr Quinzel, it's just the ramblings of a madwoman.
Harley: Alright, I won't pry, but you're not mad, Ms. Isley. Just misunderstood. And please, like I always say, call me Harley.
Ivy: s-sure thing, Dr. Q--I mean, Harley.

Meanwhile, in the Robin Support Group.

Riddler: Ten bucks Ivy confesses before she's released.
Killer Croc: Bet. I think she'll escape again and make her sexuality crisis everyone's problem again.
Calendar Man: I thought we were here to talk about our shared traumas, not gossip.
Riddler: you have $50 in the betting pool.
Calendar Man: So? I was just stating facts.

Manic Pixie Dream Dad

Chapter Summary

Jack and Janet return to Gotham.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter! I want to say I'm on a roll, but we're actually just reaching the part of my drafts where I have a lot pre-written, which is why I'm able to get it posted quicker.

Bear in mind that Tim is a bratty teenager and the biggest hypocrite on the planet. Everything he says should be taken with a grain of salt because he lives in a constant state of denial. Miss his parents? Of course not. Resents his hoard for all the rules? My boy, you KNOW why the rules are there. Promises to behave? A bald-faced lie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack and Janet Drake were a problem.

Tim was excited to see his parents, but whenever they came into town things got messy. If he and Janet were allowed to challenge each other as evolution intended, it wouldn't be an issue, but alas the humans were sensitive about family maulings.

Even worse, the humans were trying to find solutions. Please, the solution was obvious; let Tim and Janet duke it out, winner takes all. Once this farce was put to bed, everything would be fine.

But the Waynes weren't on board with that. They seemed to think Tim would regret murdering his mother, as if Janet hadn't done the exact same thing to her parent and was perfectly fine. Instead of letting Tim commit matricide like he was born to do, the Waynes adopted a very effective, very alarming strategy to stop dragon cage fights during the Drakes' visit.

They gave Cass a taser.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Tim said, edging away from Cass as she turned the electricity on and off, a big smile on her face.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Jason said. “It’ll keep you humble.”

Tim stuck his tongue out at him, then eyed Cass warily. Knowing her, she’d be looking for every opportunity to poke him and Janet with the anti-dragon stick if they misbehaved. For a girl with a no-kill rule stricter than Bruce’s, she was very trigger-happy.

“I hate this,” Tim told all of them. “You’re stymieing my ambitions.”

Bruce patted his head. “That’s the idea, champ. It’s simple and effective.”

Tim scowled at his entire hoard. Traitors. Evil, dirty traitors. Cass could probably fight Tim and Janet at the same time and win. As far as people to put on dragon babysitting duty, she was the best option. And by best, Tim meant worst. How was he supposed to sneakily kill Janet now?

Granted, he’d promised not to, but still.

“Don’t look at us like that, master Timothy,” Alfred said, setting a plate of Tim’s favorite cookies on the table. “It was your father’s idea.”

Tim growled. Jack was on his bad list now too. This was the height of betrayal. So much for a fun birthday visit.

***

Jack and Janet arrived in Gotham two days before Tim’s sixteenth birthday.

They’d come straight from Gibraltar, where one of Jack’s college buddies had a summer home, and only stopped by Drake Manor to drop off their luggage before popping over to the Wayne’s to say hi to Tim.

Tim stood on the front steps of Wayne Manor, hands shoved into his pockets as he sulked. Attempts to hide the taser from Cass had not gone well, and the Waynes had all showed up to the reunion to make sure Tim and Janet didn't throw hands.

He grumbled under his breath in draconic. Today sucked.

"Easy there, bud," Jason said, arm slung over Tim's shoulders. "They're not even out of the car yet."

Tim eyed the approaching vehicle with irritation. Dragons had sharp noses, so he'd already caught the first whiff of Janet's scent. It was as familiar as it was threatening. He wanted it *gone.*

Cass nudged him and waggled her eyebrows, as if daring him to make a move.

Tim growled again.

"I still think this is a terrible idea," Dick said as the Drakes parked the car. "There's got to be a better way to do this. Like, I don't know, not having both homicidal lizards in the same location."

"I wish," Tim said.

Unfortunately, Janet got tetchy about being away from Jack. Her record was five days apart when Tim was a baby, and Janet said she'd rather chew her own leg off than do it again. Tim didn't blame her; Jack was the only human Janet decided to hoard in her entire life. Odds were, she'd never find another one she wanted to keep. No wonder she was possessive.

Tim suspected she'd calm down once it was clear Tim wasn't going to kidnap her mate and keep him in the Batcave forever . . . Though that was only because Tim's hoard wouldn't let him. He wanted to *so bad.* Jack was basically limited edition. Tim should be allowed to lock him up for protection. Stupid taser.

Regardless, Janet was here, and so was Tim. Both their hoards have begged them not to kill each other on sight, so they were going to do their best. Hopefully, their best met the impossible standards placed upon them by their silly treasures. Honestly, they were so fussy. What was a little murder between family?

Tim's thoughts were interrupted by the slam of a car door.

"There you are, Tim," Jack said as he jumped out of the driver's seat. "Look at you, all grown up! Jan, have a gander at our boy. He takes so much after you."

Janet lowered her sunglasses and stared—unimpressed—at Tim, who wrinkled his nose back at her. The older Tim got, the more they looked alike, which was precisely the problem. Janet was perfection itself, but she was still an enemy. Tim felt like one of those birds that attacked its own reflection.

"It's good to see you again, Jack," Bruce said, stepping forward to shake his hand. "You look . . . Well."

"Thanks. You know how traveling is," Jack said. "It leaves a mark."

"I'll say," Dick said.

Jack was wearing a slightly singed Hawaiian shirt and had an aggressive tan that magnified the manic gleam in his eyes. Janet, at least, was in one of her more formal dresses and had combed her hair. It was one area where she and Tim were night and day. She loved dressing up and had an entire wardrobe of different human fashions, whereas Tim defaulted to sweatpants and stealing other people's clothes.

While Jack and Bruce exchanged pleasantries, Jason kept a firm grip on Tim, frowning at the Drakes. He was thinking so hard Tim was surprised he couldn't hear the gears turning in his skull.

"Tim, are you aware that your dad is a manic pixie dream girl?" Jason said.

Tim rolled his eyes. “First of all, how dare you. Secondly, my dad is not a manic pixie dream girl. He’s *the* manic pixie dream girl. Get it right.”

Jack had his trademark grin, and the air of someone ready to burst into song at the drop of a hat. He had his arm wrapped around Janet to stop her from pouncing on Tim, and was so used to keeping them from fighting that Tim knew he’d barely noticed himself doing it.

“Apologies, I’ll use the correct conjunction next time,” Jason said, eying Tim’s parents. “I’m just experiencing major person shock.”

“This isn’t your first time meeting them,” Tim said, poking Jason to make sure he hadn’t been replaced by a pod person. “You know what they’re like.”

Janet had a type, and it was demented American men who swooned over large reptiles. Tim didn’t try to understand it. Everyone had their faults.

Jason swatted Tim’s hand away. “There’s a difference between waving at someone on a video call and seeing them in person. Plus, you were holding me hostage at the time. I was more concerned getting back to my gang in one piece.”

Tim sighed wistfully. Good times.

“Stop making that face,” Jason said. “I know what you’re thinking, and the answer is no. You’re lucky I even showed up today after you abducted me last week.”

Tim scowled. Stupid, independent hoard member. Jason needed to stop living so far away. He had no idea how benevolent Tim was being for letting him get away with staying a couple miles away form his nest. Most dragons would never be that generous.

“Tim, come on over, let me give you a hug,” Jack said, finally done talking with Bruce. “You’ve gotten so tall.”

“No I haven’t,” Tim said. His human form hadn’t grown a centimeter since his molt, although his dragon one was getting pretty big.

He trudged over and let himself get crushed in a bear hug. Jack lifted his feet off the ground, and Tim was buried in his father’s scent. Nostalgia hit him like a bus. Tim hadn’t realized how long it’d been since he’d smelled his dad. He immediately relaxed, nuzzling deeper into Jack’s shirt as he purred.

Equally nostalgic and less pleasant was Janet’s scent . It was *everywhere.* Tim’s purr turned into a growl. He glared at her and hugged Jack tighter to get rid of the icky smell.

Janet curled her lips back and snarled.

“Okay, that’s enough family affection for one day,” Dick said, quickly pulling Tim back. “Let’s not get worked up.”

Janet grabbed Jack and yanked him back against her side. She and Tim glared at each other and hissed louder. Tim did a mental calculation for how much damage he could do if he pounced right now. The thought was tempting . . . Except Cass was bouncing on her heels, hand hovering near the pocket with the taser in it. Dangit. Tim didn’t want to get zapped.

“You two are always so excited to see each other,” Jack chuckled, careful not to lean closer to Janet or Tim. He stayed perfectly still, like he had to whenever the two of them got possessive. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s the problem,” Tim said. Jack was supposed to go with *him.* They needed proper hoard time away from Janet. Permanently.

“How about we head inside?” Dick said, voice a register higher than normal. “Alfie’s preparing dinner—”

Tim’s screech drowned out the rest of that sentence. “No! Mom’s not allowed in my hoard. She’ll steal my coffee.”

“I have no interest in your liquid dirt,” she replied, teeth bared.

“Lies!”

Coffee was the holy grail of beverages. There was no way Janet wouldn’t maul him once she tasted its deliciousness. Tim needed to defend it with his life.

“Calm down, you two,” Jack said. “There’s a lovely restaurant downtown I can get a table at. What do you say, Bruce, does Thai sound good?”

“I’m sure Alfred will appreciate the house to himself,” Bruce said with a strained smile.

Tim shot a smug look at his mother. If Alfred was protecting the coffee, she could forget about getting her claws on it. Take that, Janet. His hoard came with shotguns.

***

Dinner went as expected. Tim and Janet were good at behaving in public spaces. No blood was drawn, all the food was eaten, and they even split dessert. Tim wanted it on the record that this was great progress. He’d had his first molt last year, and he hadn’t even tried to melt her eyes with his acid yet.

“Praise me, Bruce,” Tim said on the drive home. “You should be *amazed.”*

“You tried to stab Janet with a fork,” Bruce reminded him. “And Dick caught you trying to slip cyanide into her drink.”

“So?” Tim said. “It was a gesture of affection.”

Everyone in the car sighed.

“Nobody’s dead,” Dick said. “I’d call tonight a smashing success. Although I don’t think we’ll be welcome back there.”

The entire restaurant had cleared out within twenty minutes of Janet and Tim sitting down at the table, and one of the waiters had fainted. Tim and Janet hadn’t done anything, but two dragons in the same place made for a very threatening aura. The Waynes and Jack were just numb to it.

“Mom and I had to work really hard not to attack each other,” Tim bragged. “If we were in the wild, I’d totally be trying to steal her territory. Did you know she used to have a claim on multiple mountains? That’s prime real estate for you non-dragon folk. Basically irresistible for challengers.”

She only had Drake Manor now, but that didn’t make Tim want to sink his teeth into it any less. Territory was territory.

“Also, since Gotham’s mine, she’s technically trespassing, so it’s doubly admirable that I haven’t killed her over it,” Tim said, leaning over the driver’s seat to jabber in Bruce’s ear. “Come on, B. Give me compliments.”

He shook the seat, and Bruce quirked his lips into a smile. “You did good, Tim. I’m proud of you. Thank you for translating the situation for us.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “The territory thing is really good to know.”

Tim beamed. Finally, his humans were getting it. All the Dragon 101 lessons were paying off. This was what progress looked like.

“Your dad wants to hang out with you on your birthday,” Dick said in the passenger seat. “I told him that might be hard given Janet’s . . . everything . . . But he said you three had already talked it over.”

Tim let Jason pull him back into his seat and buckle him in. He always forgot seat belts existed. “Oh, yeah. I haven’t had one-on-one time with Dad in forever, so Mom and I made a deal. It’s my birthday gift.”

There were a lot of terms and conditions she and Tim had to hash out before she was willing to agree to it, but eventually they'd reached an agreement. She took hoarding her mate *very* seriously. It'd been the hardest sell Tim had done in his life.

"That's nice of her," Dick said, smiling gently. "I never got the impression she made deals with anybody."

"She's the final boss of negotiation," Tim said proudly, "but I'm good at working with her."

Luckily, they'd hashed it out over video call, so it'd only been a verbal spar. Their compromises tended to get violent at home.

"Cool, cool," Jason said. "So, what did she want in exchange for loaning your dad to you?"

"About that," Tim said, giving his hoard his most innocent smile. "How do you guys feel about being hostages?"

Chapter End Notes

Tim: Trade offer. I give you my hoard for a day if you let me hang out with Dad.
Janet: No deal. Your humans are worth nothing to me.
Tim: You take that back!

This went on for several hours.

Bear in mind that Tim and Janet are very protective of their hoards, so them being willing to negotiate like this is a huge deal. Especially since Tim keeps trying to find loopholes to steal Jack away permanently. Janet is putting a lot of trust in her baby gremlin, but the Waynes make good collateral if Tim gets greedy. ;)

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

Secretary: Oh, hi Dr. Quinzel. How're you?
Harley: I'm doing well. How's your girlfriend?
Secretary: We're doing great. I've got a date to the Planetarium with her tonight. But speaking of beautiful women . . .
Harley: There's nothing going on between me and Ms. Isley. You know that breaks so many

laws.
Secretary: Uh huh.
Harley: I could never do that to her, you know? She's been through so much, and she's making really good progress. I don't want to set all that back, especially since she's so kind, and smart, and sensitive, and--oh no.
Secretary: Having an epiphany?
Harley: ... This isn't good.

We're A Happy Family (Really)

Chapter Summary

Jack and Tim have some long-awaited father-son time.

Chapter Notes

Not me crying when I wrote this chapter. Everything is fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim was very proud of his and Janet's conflict-resolution skills. Their years of masquerading as humans had paid off. They were masters of compromise.

Granted, the Waynes were a little miffed he'd traded them to his mom like novelty baseball cards, but it was either this or total warfare, so they could deal.

The idea was that Tim wouldn't try to kidnap Jack if his humans were on the line. Unfortunately, it was a valid strategy, and he'd agreed to it for lack of anything better to barter. If they'd been discussing inanimate objects, Tim and Janet could've traded tons of things, but Jack was different. He was a unique, special-edition, one-of-a-kind legacy hoard member, and Janet would rather cut her arm off than lose him.

Frankly, Tim was astounded she'd even agreed to his request. Janet already had Best Mom status, but she'd earned another trophy for this.

The hostage exchange happened on Tim's birthday at 6 AM, on the border between Drake and Wayne manors.

Tim was dressed in one of Dick's "I'm too sexy for my precinct" T-shirts, one of Bruce's trench coats, and Cass' favorite pair of sandals. He was bright-eyed and ready for a day of fun with his dad.

His hoard stood behind him in various stages of exhaustion.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Dick said, blinking heavily. “We stray further from intelligence every day.”

Bruce grunted unintelligibly. Cass yawned and opened Angry Birds on her phone while Alfred combed her hair. Jason wasn’t there because he’d snuck back to Crime Alley to give a seminar to his goons about selling drugs responsibly, but he was with them in spirit.

Tim rolled his eyes. “This is genius and you know it. Besides, you should be grateful. Mom can give you parenting tips while she’s hanging out with you guys.”

Dick’s face spasmed. Tim knew he’d be excited about that.

Tim heard Jack and Janet approach long before they were in sight. Janet was as quiet as moonlight on water, but Jack purposefully stepped on every twig and kept up a stream of conversation. Tim appreciated the gesture. If it’d been too quiet his fight instincts would’ve activated.

“There you are, sweetheart,” Jack said when he appeared in the undergrowth, dragging a moody Janet behind him. “Are you ready for a day of family togetherness?”

Jack was dressed in the sweater Tim finger-painted for him in first grade, and a light jacket. Janet had actually listened to Tim and wore a heavy fur coat. It was important to dress the part for a hostage exchange.

“No, but father-son togetherness sounds good,” Tim said. “Mom can bond with my hoard instead.”

“Joy,” Janet said dully, looking judgmentally at Tim’s humans. She seemed as excited to be around them as an anaconda was to get dental work.

Tim would be offended, but he was mostly just glad she wasn't interested in stealing them. Janet was even less sociable than Tim, but it worked to his advantage this time.

"Here's the deal, Mom," Tim said, pinning her with his best glare (which he'd learned from her). "You can do whatever you want with my humans—"

"Excuse me?" Dick said.

"—but if they're maimed, or traumatized, or crying when I get back then I want reparations," Tim said. "And don't touch my rocks. I just got them organized."

The tanzanite took forever to arrange in clumps on the stairs because Bruce kept stepping on the pattern and slipping until Alfred put a "Dragon at Work" sign up.

"That's no way to talk to someone giving you a favor," Janet said. "Perhaps I should rescind my offer."

They exchanged half-hearted glares. Tim swallowed a mouthful of venom and rearranged his teeth. He's started automatically transforming as soon as she'd shown up. The urge to pounce was strong, and her coat looked fun to chew on.

"You're both going to behave," Jack said diplomatically. "It'll be a fun day for both of us. Isn't that right, Brucie?"

"For the whole family," Bruce said, slightly strained.

Tim and Janet exchanged one more warning glare—complete with hisses—before they exchanged hoard members. Janet and Tim threw their coats on the ground as soon as they were done, since it was starting to get hot.

Alfred muttered something about the improper care of mink fur, but both dragons tuned him out. So what if Janet's ten-thousand-dollar coat was muddy? That's what washing machines were for.

“Have fun with Mom,” Tim told his humans as he clutched Jack’s arm. “Make sure you act extra bad so she won’t want to keep you.”

“That’s not how this works, Tim,” Dick said tiredly.

Cass didn’t answer, too busy walking in circles around Janet, making curious humming sounds. Tim heard her whisper “Timmy 1.0” with quiet glee, then she was dragging Janet toward the manor.

“Have fun, champ,” Bruce said, waving at Tim.

“I intend to,” Tim said, and left his hoard to their fate.

The last thing he heard as he and Jack strolled back to Drake manor was Dick sighing and catching up to Cass and Janet.

“So, Mrs. Drake, uh, I never asked, since last time we met you were trying to kill Tim, but what do you do for fun?” Dick said.

“Stop calling me that. It’s Janet,” Janet said blandly. “I hunt things for sport.”

Tim squeezed his dad’s arm and tugged him toward the main road. He was so proud of how things were turning out. Today was going to be great.

***

Jack was ecstatic to spend the day with Tim. He had plans upon plans upon plans. Tim almost said yes to all of them out of sheer excitement. Except, last year Tim’s birthday had been nonstop activities, and it’d been too much. So, instead of running around Gotham like crazy people, he and Jack decided to enjoy a slow day.

They had breakfast at home, with Jack gamely trying one of Tim's PB-pickle-smores, and took a drive down to Gotham Bay to throw rocks with their worst enemies' names off the dock. Tim scribbled "Joker" on all of his and yeeted them into the water. Jack wrote down the CEO of Burger King and several businessmen he hated working with.

After that, his dad took Tim to a photography store to buy a new lens, then walked with him around Robinson Park, listening to Tim tell him about his new friends and all the fun adventures he had as Robin.

"Slobo is awesome," Tim gushed, waving his free arm excitedly. His other one was linked with Jack's so they wouldn't get separated. The last thing Tim wanted was to lose track of his dad. It'd take forever to hunt him down. "He's kind of a jerk, but in a good way. He even regenerates, so when we spar I get to maul him. Last time I almost chomped him in half!"

Hanging out with Young Justice was awesome, but his and Slobo's two-person fight club was legendary. Next time, Tim wanted to battle him at sunset on the peak of a raging volcano.

"He sounds good for you," Jack chuckled. "I'll keep an eye out for his original version—Lobo, you said? I'm sure Janet would love someone to play with too."

Tim tried to imagine his mom willingly interacting with anyone, but the image wouldn't compute. But maybe if she had an alien to munch on, that'd change. Built-in chew toys were a social game changer.

"I'm proud of you, kiddo," Jack said as they passed the part of the park Tim accidentally burned down the other week. "You've got so many friends now. It's a dream come true."

"Dad, stop, please," Tim said, actively praying for a mugger to try and rob them. Emotions? On his birthday? What kind of dark timeline was this? "Dragons don't need friends."

"I know, I know," he said. "But I'm glad you have them anyway. It's important to find your people and build a support network."

Tim's eyes glazed over. He'd heard all this before, but *he* was the one who supported his hoard. It shouldn't go both ways. Tim could take care of himself, and his told his Dad as much.

“Of course, sweetheart,” Jack said, squeezing Tim’s shoulder. “But that doesn’t mean you have to.”

“You sound like Dick,” Tim muttered.

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a compliment.”

After hanging out at the park, Tim and Jack got lunch at Tim’s favorite cafe. The waitress gave Tim an expired cupcake covered in hot sauce and bacon bits when he told her it was his birthday, so Tim left her a bigger tip than usual. At this point, he was pretty sure she could pay for all her college textbooks without dipping into her FAFSA. She was really good at her job.

By the time afternoon hit, Tim was ready for a nap. It’d been a long time since he’d had a day all to himself. Usually when he had the day off, he was doing bat-things or Young Justice things. Having actual down-time was rare.

He and Jack took a drive to the mainland and found a nature trail. After they got far enough away from the main path, Tim transformed and flew a few dozen miles into the countryside so they could have some proper alone time.

It wasn’t until they were a thousand feet in the air that Tim realized this was the first time he’d flown with his dad. It’d only ever been Janet that gave him rides. Tim had been too small, and then they’d been gone.

They landed in a valley and sat on a slab of shale near a stream. The mid-afternoon sun turned the humid air into an oven, soaking into Tim’s skin as he slumped against Jack, breathing in his scent. Birds cried warnings to each other overhead, no doubt sensing Tim’s presence. Everything smelled like summer.

“I’m glad we could visit, Timmy,” Jack said, wrapping his arm around Tim’s shoulders. “It’s been too long.”

"Me too," Tim said as he tucked himself against his dad. "I don't like you being gone."

It was the lesser of two evils, but the only way they could maintain their happy family was by splitting it down the middle. Tim didn't mind most of the time, but occasionally the ache got really bad. Tim still didn't know how to turn it off, even after all these years.

"I'm sorry, kiddo," Jack said, "I should've come back sooner. I know you get lonely."

"Please, as if," Tim said, kicking his shoes off so he could dip his toes into the creek. "Dragons are above such petty emotions."

It was more like withdrawal. Besides, Tim had the rest of his hoard *and* a gaggle of friends. He was fine.

"Mm, of course," Jack said. "But I wasn't talking about your dragon DNA."

Tim rolled his eyes. Not this again. "Dad, *come on,* the human stuff barely counts."

"It's still there," Jack said, going cross-eyed as a butterfly landed on his nose. It balanced on him for a moment, then took flight in a burst of orange.

"Only, like, a tiny bit," Tim said. "Bruce had been doing tests, you know. I'm like, 90% dragon, at *least.*"

Probably. Kind of. It was hard to tell since Tim could manipulate his cells at will. But, for the sake of his dignity, 90% seemed like a safe bet. Mostly dragon, but with enough human genes to placate his hoard. (It wasn't an arbitrary number. Tim had worked hard to weigh the data in its favor.)

"90% isn't 100%," Jack said, missing the point.

“Why are you so obsessed with my human side, Dad?” Tim said, sixteen years of confusion in his voice. “Just because I’ve got a few strands of Homo sapien DNA in me doesn’t make me one of them.”

Nor did Tim want to be. Dragons were so much cooler than emotional, squishy people that couldn’t even breathe fire.

Jack sighed and rested his chin on Tim’s head. “I don’t want to make you human, Tim. I want you to be safe *around* humans. There’s a big difference.”

“Hiding is annoying,” Tim said. “I’m strong enough that humans aren’t even a threat.”

Sure, they’d invented nuclear warfare and torture tools, but most wouldn’t even survive in the wild on their own. They’d domesticated *themselves.*

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about,” Jack said, giving Tim a head scratch.

Tim sighed, even as he melted into his dad’s side. “I really don’t.”

Jack hummed and gazed at the creek. “Do you remember when you were a toddler? Before preschool?”

“Uh, kind of,” Tim said. He remembered bits and pieces—lighting a curtain on fire, squeezing into the vents, Janet throwing him off the indoor balcony to teach him to fly—but not as crisply as he’d like. Those years were blurry and vague, like a window covered in dish soap.

“I never expected to be a father,” Jack said. “You were a complete surprise, but when you were born was the happiest day of my life.”

“Sap,” Tim said, squirming. He hoped Jack wouldn’t go on another tangent about his and Janet’s meet-cute. He’d suffered through it too many times. Enough was enough. Jack didn’t even focus on the exciting parts, just the gooey ickiness of falling in love.

“Sap is how we get syrup, so thanks for calling me sweet,” Jack said. “Anyway, I thought you’d be a dragon. *Just* a dragon, but you’re more than that.”

“Sure. Right,” Tim hoped this didn’t result Jack breaking out the photo albums again. There was an entire folder dedicated to Tim’s shapeshifting, carefully marking his growth rate and abilities. “Whatever you say.”

“I mean it. I know you and Janet have strong opinions about how dragons act,” Jack said, “but you *didn’t* match that criteria. The first year you were alive, you couldn’t stay away from her. Granted, you were trying to kill her half the time, but otherwise you were a little cuddle bug.”

Tim made an affronted noise. “I was not!”

“Yes, you were. It was adorable,” Jack said, smiling like a goof. “Your mother was so confused. I’ve got some wonderful videos of the two of you. I can send you a copy.”

“Please don’t,” Tim said with a shudder. He didn’t want to see himself acting so unnaturally. Why had he taken his shoes off? He wanted to run from this conversation.

Jack rolled his eyes fondly. “Alright, suit yourself. Regardless, that’s when I realized that even if you’re mostly dragon, that’s not *all* you are.”

Tim didn’t like where this was going. Deep, deep down was an icky, human part of himself, but Tim didn’t like to pay attention to it. The fact that his dad knew it was there was mortifying. Jason’s complaints about losing his street cred suddenly made a lot more sense.

“Okay, but *theoretically* if I’m like, ten percent less awesome than Mom, I’m still mostly dragon,” Tim said, kicking his feet in the creek. The water was pleasantly cool, and there were crawdads in the shallows. “So, we don’t have to talk about it. Majority genes get final say.”

Jack’s reply was to laced his fingers through Tim’s hand and give them a gentle squeeze. “Is being like me really so bad?”

“Not really, but humans don’t make sense,” Tim said. “Everything you do is backwards and weird. Being a dragon is much easier and more fun. Sometimes, I wish I could be one forever. Life would be much easier that way.”

It’d be survival of the fittest, dragon eat dragon, with no morals, high school, or social conventions to complicate things. Tim yearned for the mines.

“I don’t think you’d enjoy that as much as you think,” Jack said. “It’s a lonely life. Just ask your mother.”

Tim would *not* ask Janet. Their entire relationship revolved around staring woodenly at each other while Jack forced them to communicate, and hissing in draconic when he wasn’t looking. Emotional conversations were mutually forbidden.

“I know it’s hard to fit in,” Jack said as the wind rattled the trees. “You and Janet do it so well, but I’ll always worry. You and Jan are everything to me, son. I don’t want to think about what my life would be like without you.”

Tim sunk deeper into his father’s embrace, skin prickling from the feelings in the air. “You’re silly, Dad. You’d be just fine.”

“I really wouldn’t,” Jack said, without his usual mirth. “Trust me on that.”

Tim kicked a pebble into the brook, scaring the crawdads away. A cloud passed overhead, hiding the sun from sight.

“It’s just frustrating,” Tim said. “I’m never sure if I’m doing things the right way. Dragons aren’t supposed to have families. Even clans are uncommon.”

They were a series of complicated territory disputes and mating agreements that mostly existed to drive off invading dragons en masse. Dragons were happiest alone without anybody to bother them, *especially* their own kind.

Jack sighed. “I know . . . and I'm sorry, Tim. You and Janet both deal with so much. I never give you enough credit.”

“It's fine,” Tim said grumpily. “I'm used to it, and so is Mom. I get why we do it.”

Fear of traffickers, leaked identities, threats to their lives, yadda yadda.

“It's still not ideal,” Jack said. He kicked a pebble into the creek. “I wish I could do more for you both, but this was the best solution I could come up with since living in the wilderness didn't work out.

Tim sat up straight. “The what now?”

Jack squinted at a bird circling overheard, seemingly unaware of the bombshell he’d just dropped. “Oh, well, Janet and I tried that once. It didn't end well.”

What. The heck.

“And you're only telling me *now!?”* Tim said. They had video calls every week and Jack never thought this would make good small talk?

“It's water under the bridge,” Jack shrugged. “Besides, we would've had to give it up when you came along anyway. Even when you started shapeshifting, you needed full-time care.”

Tim was offended. “I did not.”

“Yes, you did,” Jack said. “I have proof, remember?”

Tim made a mental note to burn all his baby pictures.

“Ignoring part of yourself won't make it go away. Trust me,” Jack said. “Whether you like it or not, you're part of two worlds, Tim. That's why I want you to learn about this one as much as possible.”

“So you sent me to jail,” Tim said.

“School is not jail. It's part of your human experience.”

Tim threw another rock into the creek. “A *bad* experience. Dragons don't need education. We're smart enough on our own. We don’t need anyone or anything.”

Jack laughed awkwardly. “That doesn't mean you don't deserve to have them. Family is important, son. It's not something to be treated lightly.”

“What, because yours was so great?” Tim snapped.

He immediately snapped his mouth shut, but the damage had been done. Jack tensed and looked away, smile gone.

All at once, the wind left Tim's sails. He ducked his head and grabbed Jack’s sleeve. "Sorry, Dad.”

"It's fine,” Jack said. “You didn't mean anything by it."

Tim shook his head. "No, it’s not okay. I’m ... sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. I know we're not supposed to talk about grandma and grandpa."

Jack hummed. The air was quiet for a moment. Tim leaned against his dad in apology. It’d been a low blow. Jack had his own monsters under the bed, and Janet and Tim knew better than to bring them up.

"I know I'm not perfect," Jack said at length. "You and your mother are right when you call me silly. I'm a joke to most people, but that's intentional. Honesty and kindness aren't good for

guarding your heart, but they make good smoke screens. Before I met your mother, I thought happy families were too good to be true. But I've learned an important secret about love, Timmy. Are you ready to hear it?"

Tim nodded, uncharacteristically quiet.

"Love is a choice," Jack said. "It's rare to find and harder to hold onto. The most valuable things have the highest cost."

Tim closed his eyes and thought about the sacrifices Jack made for him and Janet. Staying away from his ancestral home so Tim could be safe, lying to everyone he met to hide their identities, traveling nonstop for a decade to keep his wife and son happy, along with a thousand other things that Tim took for granted.

Sometimes, Tim made such a fuss over himself that he forgot that Jack's situation was less than ideal. When Tim had been born, he hadn't been the only one locked inside the house. Jack had essentially cut himself off from his entire support network and hadn't reconnected with his friends until Tim was in preschool.

"I'm sorry," Tim said. "It hasn't been easy for you either."

All Jack wanted was a family, but Janet and Tim made that as difficult to have as possible, simply by existing.

Jack kissed the top of Tim's head. "No, but nothing worth having has ever been easy. You have to decide what you're willing to give up for happiness, or it'll vanish like you never had it at all. Even happily ever afters don't last forever. You blink and they're gone. The most important thing you can do with your life is make sure you don't waste it."

"That's morbid," Tim said, as a murder of crows flew overhead, their shadows hugging the ground like funeral shrouds.

"No, it's realistic," Jack said. "But I've found what I want to hold onto, and I don't regret a second of it. You and your mother are the best thing that ever happened to me, and nothing is ever going to change that."

Tim blinked rapidly, and sank deeper into his dad's embrace. "Sap."

"So you've said," Jack replied, a smile in his voice. "But I don’t mind playing the fool for you."

He rubbed circles on Tim's back, and hummed that song again. It was a simple, off-key melody that Tim remembered being tucked into bed with every night as a child. Memories of Jack putting glow in the dark stars up in his room, reading bedtime stories, and checking in at night, hit Tim like spring rain.

"I don't tell you enough," Tim said quietly. "But I'm really glad you're my dad."

Jack smelled like a thousand far away lands and a hundred warm smiles. He never complained about the life he chose, or treated Tim like he was different. Even though he forced him to do annoying human things, Tim would never doubt that he was loved.

“Me too, kiddo,” he said. “I’m sorry life isn’t easier, but I don’t want you to miss out on anything. If you want to return to the wild after you’re eighteen, I can find a way to live with that, but all this —your education, the How to Be Human Classes, our family vacations—is a chance for you to have a childhood. I made a promise to treasure you, and I will for as long as I can, even if you think it’s silly. Family has never been a joke to me.”

Tim pressed closer to hide how much of an effect those words had.

Jack was an idiot. He was silly, delusional, and committed to having a happy family to the point that even Tim and Janet’s combined efforts couldn’t deter him. He was sneaky, dramatic, and never took no for an answer. He was also one of the best (and worst) liars Tim knew . . . But Jack never lied about family.

Tim had never doubted that his father loved him. He knew, even when he wanted nothing more than to ditch his human skin, that the greatest treasure he’d even been given were two parents that cared. Jack Drake, silly as he was, wanted Tim to be happy above everything else . . . Even if it meant throwing Tim into elementary school to do it.

“I wanted to give you the childhood I never had. I hope you can forgive me for being so selfish,” Jack said quietly. “I want you to have a taste of humanity, just in case it’s something you want to hold onto.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Tim muttered, hiding his face in Jack’s coat. “You’re my hoard.”

And more than that, he was his father. Tim had been around enough humans to know that parents were never perfect. Jason and Bruce’s tumultuous relationship was proof of that, but they were trying—and that meant struggling, healing, and compromising so they could meet in the middle.

Jack never talked about his childhood. Tim’s grandparents were an unspoken subject, left to the cobwebs of time. Happy families were a fantasy of Jack’s for a reason, and Tim and Janet (emotionally allergic as they were) indulged him however they could, because loving someone meant making sacrifices. And this sacrifice? It was worth it, without any doubt.

Tim didn’t like a lot of things. School was boring, attempting to understand morality was a headache, and constantly checking his aggression was his personal rock of Sisyphus. But he had to admit, the years of practice he had blending in with humans was useful. Because of them, he had a hoard, a civilian identity, and a thousand other skills and abilities he never would have had in the wild.

Like it or not, Jack *had* given Tim a gift; the ability to be himself, regardless of what skin he wore. It was more valuable than all the gold in the earth.

“I’ll probably stick around Gotham after high school,” Tim said as the sun painted the forest gold. “You know, since my hoard is here. But I’m not going to college. That’s pushing it.”

Jack chuckled. “Don’t worry, kiddo, once you have your GED, you can do whatever you want.”

Tim purred in satisfaction.

Lo and behold, Jack was learning. Miracles did occur.

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They stayed by the creek for another hour, watching the sun turn amber in the late afternoon. Around seven, instead of a sunset, the sky glowed like honey and illuminated everything in a gloaming. Tim tasted the first hint of dew as the shadows grew long. Their talk had left Tim feeling drained, so he stayed slumped against his dad while Jack talked about his travels. It was soothing, and Tim wished they could stay there forever. Too bad Janet had hostages.

Eventually, Jack stood and helped Tim to his feet. “We should probably start heading back. It’s a long flight to Gotham.”

“Do we have to?” Tim said, hunching his shoulders. “It’s not even dark yet.”

They had at least half an hour before night fell, and Tim was loath to leave. As soon as they got back the manor, Janet would demand they swap humans again, but Tim wasn’t ready for the day to end. He’d barely gotten any Jack-time at all.

“We don’t have to go directly back,” Jack said, straightening his jacket. “I think it’d be fun to take a few detours before everything closes for the night.”

Tim was curious despite himself. “Like where?”

“Well,” Jack pulled out his phone and showed Tim a picture of a small restaurant. “There’s a new coffee shop in Bludhaven I’ve heard good things about. I’m no expert, so I thought it’d be good to get a dragon’s opinion on their imported blends.”

Tim’s squeal was totally valid and very mature. His exhaustion vanished like snow in an oven.

“Yes. Let’s buy one of everything,” he said. “No, two of everything. And I want extra espresso shots.”

He was going to enter the Speedforce through sheer caffeine intake, that way he could finally catch Bart’s red lightning.

“Sounds like a plan,” Jack said as Tim grabbed his phone and scrolled through the online menu.

They had Ethiopian luxury brands, coffeemakers form Milan, and some Indian blends full of spices. He’d have to be careful or he’d drool acid. This place was *amazing*.

He filled a cart with their order so it’d be ready when they arrive, then paused. “Dad, you can’t tell Alfred about this. I’m not supposed to have more than a couple cups a day. If he finds out, we’re doomed.”

The butler was the manor's stalwart defender, but his protection came at a bitter cost. He and Tim were locked in a Cold War over Tim's coffee collection. Alfred was still mad about the spice rack incident.

Jack tapped the side of his nose. "Your secret's safe with me, son. Besides, you've got patrol tonight. A bit of extra energy would do you good."

"Yeah," Tim said, "but Bruce doesn't like it when I'm too hyper. He says I try to bite too many people."

Bruce was dead wrong though. Tim didn't *try* to bite people. He succeeded . His record was twelve gangsters in one night. But Bruce didn't seem impressed by that. He'd been making up nonsense about Arkham having a dedicated Robin Support Group, as if Tim would buy such an obvious lie.

Jack winked at Tim, face too innocent to be anything but devious. "That sounds like Batman's problem, not mine. Anyway, he's determined to look after you, so I'm sure he can handle it."

Warm happiness burned in Tim's heart. "You're the best, Dad."

Birthday fun times, coffee, and good old-fashioned lying? No wonder Janet refused to let him go. Jack was a treasure.

Chapter End Notes

Jack Drake, my beloved, you'll never be a joke to me.

When I started this story, I didn't expect Jack to become one of my favorite characters, or become as fleshed out as he has. But an important thing about families is that they're complicated, and happy families aren't perfect. Jack is a wonderful father, but this has not been a comedy for him.

(That said, he does think it's hilarious when he siccs a caffeinated juvenile dragon on Batman, and leaves him to deal with the fallout. This is payback for Bruce sneaking custody clauses into business proposals for over a year.)

Diamonds Are A Drake's Best Friend

Chapter Summary

There are no diamonds in this chapter. I just like the wordplay. :P

Chapter Notes

Me: Let's write a few paragraphs about what the Waynes did during Tim's birthday.
one chapter later
Me: Oh dear.

I don't have an overwriting problem. I can quit anytime!

Apologies for any typos. I'm posting this at the airport, so I'm both sleep-deprived and exhausted.

Also! As some of you may have noticed, the series has a prequel now! If you want to see just how Jack and Janet met, part one of the series is updated every Saturday, and will have their meet-disaster in all its glory. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Patrol was awesome.

Granted, Tim didn't remember much of it, but he knew he'd had a great time. The coffee gave Tim the energy of a nuclear power plant: He dashed across rooftops faster than a speeding bullet, got dragged away from several fights by an exasperated Bruce for "excessive, enthusiasm-induced violence," and got to plant trackers on some mob-owned vehicles while practicing his sneaking skills. Near the end, he, Bruce, and Cass even got ice cream together. It was the best night ever, and Tim couldn't be happier.

Tim was so happy, in fact, that he'd forgotten about Janet.

Bruce hadn't mentioned his mom at all, so Tim hadn't bothered to ask what went down at the manor until he was in the batmobile on the way home.

“Janet funny,” Cass said when Tim remembered he had a mother, and that he should probably care what she did that day. “Like you, but tougher.”

“I resent that,” Tim said. “I’m tough.”

Cass patted his head, squishing him deeper into the seat. “No, you delulu.”

Tim swatted her hand away and hissed to assert dominance. Like always, it didn’t work. Cass just cooed and called him cute.

For the most part, Janet had ignored the Waynes. They didn’t interest her, and the only thing she hated more than feelings was small talk. Even Alfred wasn’t exempt from her curled lip and disappointed glare when he’d engaged with her, so everyone left her to her own devices.

Everyone except Cass.

Tim got the blow-by-blow account of how she followed his mom around the manor all day, poking and prodding until Janet tried to bite her in a game of “tag.” After an hour of stalking each other through the manor, Janet finally gave up and let Cass drag her around like a wet cat.

“We play Slap-Jack,” Cass said, as the batmobile pulled into the cave. “I win.”

“Seriously?” Tim rolled out of the car and thought about his mother’s sharp fingernails and lightning-fast reaction time. Even for Cass, beating Janet in a game that relied on speed was impressive.

“Super serious,” she said, rubbing her hands together like a villain.

“We thought she was going to lose her hand a couple of times,” Dick said. He was leaning against the batcomputer, dressed in neon orange civvies. “Your mom plays dirty.”

“Duh. That’s the best way to win,” Tim said. He ran to the lockers and started yanking off his outer gear.

While he peeled off layers of sweaty kevlar, Cass continued to brag about her victory against “the bigger Timmy.” As a reward for winning, Cass had made Janet take her flying in the countryside after lunch, give her a couple jade-colored scales, and watch the first How To Train Your Dragon Movie.

On an unrelated note, the TV in the family room was now destroyed. Janet liked dragons in media as much as Tim did. AKA, not at all.

“I can’t believe Mom took you flying,” Tim said as he threw his cape into the hamper. “Maybe she *does* like you.”

The thought was horrifying. If Janet decided to keep Cass, Tim would have a war on his hands. No way was he giving up one of his best humans. Their truce would die a fiery, acid-filled death.

“Everyone likes me. I’m an . . .” Cass looked at Dick and narrowed her eyes. “IT girl?”

“Yup,” Dick said, flashing her a thumbs up. “That’s the word.”

Cass puffed with so much pride Tim was surprised she didn’t float. She was getting really good at slang.

Bruce patted Tim’s back. “Don’t worry, Tim, we couldn’t stop Cass, but we made sure to apologize to Janet for her.”

Tim paused peeling his domino mask off, to squint at Bruce in confusion. “Apologize?”

“Yeah,” Dick said, giving Cass a rough hair ruffle. “Cass said it was fine, but we know you and Janet don’t like being forced into things. And you’re not pack mules or animals, so giving out rides . . . Well, that’s offensive, right?”

Tim

Needed a moment.

“What?” He said, after trying and failing to process that. “Why would giving people rides be offensive?”

Was this a human thing? Like controlling where people slept?

Dick and Bruce both gave him confused looks. There was a lot of awkwardness in the air.

“Because it’s demeaning?” Dick said slowly. “Lots of hybrids and shape-shifters hate feeling used like that. They said it’s dehumanizing. . . .”

Dick trailed off, having seemed to realize how ridiculous he sounded the moment the words were out of his mouth. Tim hadn’t wanted to be “humanized” once in his life.

“You don’t find it offensive, do you?” Bruce said tiredly.

Tim shook his head. “I give Cass rides all the time. It’s fun. Especially the loop-de-loops. I would’ve offered to take you flying too, but I figured you weren’t interested.”

“I’m a *flying* Grayson,” Dick said, voice raising in pitch. “Of course I want cool dragon rides! Tim, why didn’t you tell me they were on the table!?”

Tim shrugged. “You never asked.”

Dick twisted his hands in his hair and muttered under his breath about lost opportunities and bad communication skills.

Tim finished changing into some sweats, then cracked his neck. It'd been a long day, and the coffee was finally wearing off. Tiredness soaked his bones.

"Don't worry, Dick," Tim yawned. "We can go flying during our hoard time. Maybe the G-force will squish more common sense into your head."

He needed to do more aerial maneuvers anyway. He didn't want to get rusty.

"Not how that works, Tim," Dick said absently, still looking annoyed.

"Whatever," Tim said, rubbing his eyes. "I'm just glad today went well. It sounds like Mom was well-behaved, all things considered."

She really did have the patience of a saint. Tim would've snapped in less than an hour if a human he wasn't hoarding harassed him like Cass did to her. He hoped someday he could be as wise and tranquil as his mother. She was his role-model for all things ever.

"About that . . ." Dick said, trading irritation for sheepishness. "There might've been a couple of . . . incidents."

Tim's exhaustion vanished like a lovely assistant in a magic act. "What do you mean, incidents?"

The Waynes avoided eye contact. Even Cass.

Tim decided now was a good time to panic.

"Alfred!" He yelled, bolting for the stairs. "Alfred, is my coffee okay? Are you dead? What's going on?!"

The manor had better still be standing, or he and his mother would have *words.*

***

Betrayal.

This was evil, diabolical, unforgivable betrayal. Tim lived in a broken world full of treacherous parents and useless hoard members.

“What cruel God would do this to me?” he whined. “Is nothing sacred?”

“Sorry, Tim,” Dick said. “We tried to stop her.”

“Lies!”

His hoard wasn’t dead, so clearly they hadn’t put up much of a fight.

“I thought she loved me,” Tim said. Kneeling wasn’t good enough. He collapsed on the floor like a dead animal. “Were the past sixteen years of affection a lie? Mom’s not supposed to lie, Dick. She’s bad at it!”

Deception and Janet Drake were natural enemies. She put the same amount of effort into lying as Tim did into school. The only reason Jack never caught on was because he lived in a fantasy world where Janet never did anything wrong ever, and believed whatever she said at face-value.

Clearly, his dad was delusional. Janet did so much wrong. She did *all* the wrongs, and this was exhibit A.

“I think she was trying to show she cared?” Dick said unhelpfully. “She didn’t actually say anything . . . But glares are affectionate, right?”

Tim glared at him, decidedly unaffectionate.

Janet had rearranged Tim's entire hoard.

As far as evil deeds went, Tim ranked this on par with destroying the Mona Lisa.

Tim and his mother had *very* different opinions on hoard organization. Janet seemed to think Tim had no idea how to arrange his stuff properly, and Tim was of the opinion that his mother couldn't organize to save her life.

Normally, they agreed to disagree, but while Tim had been having happy fun times with his father, Janet had taken it upon herself to completely destroy Tim's beautiful, wonderful, carefully arranged displays until they mirrored how she arranged things back home.

It was like looking at a war zone: Every stone, button, and doodad was two inches to the left, Tim's rug had been turned one-hundred and eighty degrees, and his crystal collection was completed reorganized. Even his books hadn't been safe; the hard copies were arranged by color instead of cover size, and the sacrificial ones Tim liked to shred when he was bored were shelved.

Shelved.

She might as well have taken a gun to his spleen and shot him. Using bookshelves for their intended purpose was so wrong.

"This is slander," Tim said. "And evil! Evil, unjustifiable manslaughter. I can't believe you let her get away with this. And you call yourself my hoard. I'm angry *and* disappointed."

Just when he thought his humans were acing their dragon classes, they went and did this. This just proved they weren't equipped to handle real world problems. They couldn't even defend his nest from non-lethal harm.

Dick sighed. "Trust me, Timmy, we tried. But even Cass couldn't stop her. Your mother's even harder to corral than *you.* "

Tim hissed. Lies! Both he and Janet were well-behaved. It wasn't their fault if their humans didn't know how to handle them.

Although . . . *Maybe* it was unfair of Tim to expect his squishy humans to defend themselves against an adult Yinlong with more kills under her belt than Deathstroke. They should've tried harder (obviously) but the only one Janet listened to was Jack, and even then she practiced selective hearing religiously.

Blaming them for being their helpless selves wasn't very kosher of him. Humans could only do so much, after all.

"I know you're upset, but this'll be fine, Tim," Dick said, squeezing Tim's shoulder. "Nothing's broken, she didn't touch your coffee, and we can make a day of helping you put everything back the way you like it. All's well that ends well."

Dick's soothing words landed on deaf ears.

"This needs to end *in* a well," Tim muttered. "Preferably one deep enough to drown in."

Having another dragon fiddle with his treasures was insulting. It shouldn't be allowed to happen ever again on pain of death. Janet would rue the day she did this to him.

"Very funny, I like the word play," Dick said. "But the way I've heard it, you're just as bad when you're in her nest, so maybe lay off the death threats. This is a two-way street."

Tim blinked, surprised. He'd never have expected Dick to defend Janet. He usually made a big show of disliking her, even though Tim knew he secretly adored her. (Why wouldn't he? Dick was obsessed with parenting, and Janet was a near-perfect parent. Ergo, he had to admire her. It just made sense.)

"If you don't want someone giving you a taste of your own medicine, you'll need to be nicer to them," Dick continued. "If you ask me, you reaped what you sowed today, and Janet could've been a lot meaner."

Tim continued to be surprised . . . Was this how Janet felt when Tim was a child? He was guilty of doing similar things back when he was young and bite-sized. But Janet had been asking for it. Who put jade next to opals? Or filled vases with Hi-chews? Tim had been *improving* things in Drake Manor, and anyone who said otherwise needed a lobotomy.

"I've done nothing wrong in my life ever," Tim said, deciding to ignore Dick like he usually did. He'd sown nothing, therefore everything happening wasn't his fault. "Mom's turned you against me."

"She really hasn't," Dick said, deadpan. "She kind of freaks me out, to be honest. I don't know how your dad's stopped her from killing people for over twenty years. Did you know she spent nearly an hour growling at the dinosaur in the batcave? I thought she was going to smash it. Who does that? Everybody loves the dinosaur."

Tim thought about his multi-year plan to destroy the dumb animatronic reptile bolt by bolt. "Yeah, sure. What's not to like?"

Aside from everything, that is. Tim hated the T-rex downstairs more than Barney, the purple dinosaur that plagued his preschool days. It gave him the uncanny valley effect, and deserved to die.

"I'm glad you agree with me," Dick said brightly. "It's probably my favorite trophy Bruce kept. Now, let's get started fixing your hoard. What do you need help with first?"

"Dick, no," Tim said irritably. "I'm a dragon. We don't need help with anything."

He was a fierce killing machine, and his humans needed to get with the program.

"Uh huh," Dick said. He looked around the room, and the ten thousand things Tim had to fix. "Right. Of course. But there's a lot of stuff to rearrange. A little assistance goes a long way."

Tim dug his heel into the ground and pouted. His skin crawled relying on anyone, but Dick had a point.

“Can you fix the books?” Tim mumbled, careful not to let his teeth shift into fangs. It was always harder to stay person-shaped when his emotions ran high. “I want them on the floor so I can step on them.”

He liked how the edges felt on his feet.

“Sure thing, little buddy.”

Dick would’ve sounded condescending, except Tim could tell he was actually glad to be included.

They spent the rest of the night carefully putting things back the way they were. Tim grumbled death threats to his mom under his breath the entire time . . . Until he found a small box hidden under his bed, wrapped with a neat bow.

He opened it carefully, keeping it out of Dick’s line of sight.

Inside was a small collection of opals, all carefully faceted with perfect rose cuts. One of them had a scratch on the front from where Tim remembered chewing on it as a toddler.

“What do you have there, Timmy?” Dick asked from the closet.

“Nothing,” Tim said, shoving the box back under his bed.

His face was on fire. Those were some of Janet’s favorite rocks. There was no way she’d left them here on accident. Which meant it was a present. A birthday present.

It wasn’t often a dragon gave away part of their hoard. . . . Maybe he could give her a pass on rearranging his stuff, just this once.

Chapter End Notes

Jack: How was Tim's hoard, sweetheart?
Janet: A deplorable mess of loud, irritating humans and awful organization. I never want to go back.
Jack: Oh good, so there's no one you want to steal?
Janet: I would consider the quiet girl, but she reminds me too much of Timothy when he was younger. I'm done raising children.
Jack: aw, really? I would've helped adopt her.
Janet: No more kids!
Jack: ;(

Meanwhile, at Arkham:

Ivy: Why are you all scared of Robin? I know he's technically a teenager, but he's baby-coded and hardly a monster.
Robin Support Group: How dare you besmirch these sacred halls with your lies.

Much Ado About Jason

Chapter Summary

Romance is in the air.

Somebody give Tim a gas mask, STAT.

Chapter Notes

I've returned from the war (vacation)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next couple of weeks, Tim walked on clouds.

Sure, things weren't perfect (Janet was still too close for peace of mind, and Tim had to be dragged away from the window so he couldn't fly home to maul her several times) but they were good.

He had an awesome birthday, Drake Manor was still standing, and he hadn't gotten into any "incidents" at WE recently. He was a ten out of ten for good behavior, and his hoard couldn't be happier.

Tim practically purred with satisfaction, happy that they were happy. He was almost disappointed that he'd be leaving Gotham in a couple days for his and Cass' dance retreat. He was acing this self-control business, and didn't want to ruin his streak.

But he couldn't say no to Cass, so he'd just have to deal. And for now, he had plenty of time to bask in victory over resisting his instincts.

Tim stretched out on the couch in the library, idly dog-earing the pages of a book. Warm, cozy sun beamed in from the window, making him drowsy and content. Alfred had left him a cup of tea earlier, and everybody else was at work. For the first time in a long time, Tim was completely alone.

He sighed and let his spine elongate, just to feel it crack. He'd forgotten how nice lounging in the sun was. It made his lizard brain happy. Life was good. Peaceful. Even with Janet in the same city, Tim was glad he could take the time to enjoy tranquility like this.

The distant sound of pounding feet made his ears twitch.

"Timmy!" Cass said, throwing the door open. The knob dented the drywall.

"What?" Tim said, rubbing the sleepiness out of his eyes. He should've known not to jinx himself. "Is something happening?"

Cass yanked him off the couch and tugged him toward the door. "Hurry, hurry. Big news. Jason has girlfriend."

The exhaustion fell off Tim like an anvil into the ocean.

"What?!"

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"Are you *sure* you heard correctly?" Tim asked, peeking over Steph's head.

He, Steph, and Cass were tailing Jason to crash his date. Currently, they were huddled behind a corner of a building, peeking their heads out around the corner as Jason bought flowers from a man on the corner.

"Yeah, duh," Steph said, adjusting her binoculars. "Cass can lip-read like a pro. Besides, we stole his planner, and it literally said "date with Mary." The evidence adds up."

"Yeah, but still," Tim said. "It's *Jason."*

This was the guy who cried whenever he watched *A Little Princess,* founded book clubs via the mob and mercenary guilds, and wrote essays on literature for fun. Even though Jason was a fan of the Romantics, Tim was pretty sure he'd never been on a date in his life.

"I know, he's got no rizz," Steph said, dressed in a lavender miniskirt. She claimed it made a good disguise because it wasn't as bright as her other purple clothes. "But that's why this is such a big deal. Right, Cass?"

Cass nodded seriously. "Unnatural. Must stop. Sisterly duty."

Tim hummed neutrally. He didn't care if Jason found a mate as long as he didn't pull a Dick and flood social media with gross, gooey pictures of his love life. If he had kids, that just meant more mini-Jasons for the hoard, which was fine by Tim.

Still, Tim would have to make sure whoever Jason was swooning over was hoardable. If he didn't approve of them, they'd get voted off the island. And by voted, Tim meant abandoned in the Canadian wilderness to be killed by wolverines and moose. It was bad enough his humans had friends. Tim wasn't putting up with humans he didn't like in his nest.

"He's moving," Steph said, adjusting her binoculars. "Come on, guys. This is going to be the best blackmail material ever."

She dragged Tim and Steph down the street, careful to stay out of Jason's sight.

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The three of them blinked in confusion at the sign above their heads.

MWS Rare Books and Collectibles, Est. 1963. Was a used bookstore in the Upper West Side, tucked between a bakery and an art gallery. Everything from its brick-and-mortar walls to the marigolds in the window box was homey and sweet. It oozed an aura of sophistication and nostalgia wrapped in the smell of old books.

“Boring,” Cass said, echoing Tim’s thoughts exactly.

“Maybe she’s also a nerd?” Steph said, fiddling with her binoculars. “A huge nerd.”

“She’d have to be,” Tim said, peering through the front window. “They only have old people books here.”

From what he could tell, there wasn’t a YA novel or comic book to be seen. Just endless rows of poetry and old-timey stories about Victorian orphans. He could smell the academia from here. Disgusting.

“Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Steph said, also suspicious of the building’s respectability. “We’ve already come this far. Besides, it’s Jason’s girlfriend. She’s probably into geriatric stuff like this.”

They braced themselves and headed inside.

Polished oak counters and creaky floors greeted them, along with a display of novelty candles and themed notebooks. Tim sneezed on the smell of paper and glue, and hid his nose with his sleeve. The front desk was empty. Jason was nowhere to be seen.

“This way,” Cass said. “Hear voices.”

They scuttled through several small rooms cluttered with Wordsworth and Byron collections. It was so maze-like that Tim wished he had a compass. Eventually, they reached a huge vault in the back of the store. Its door was six inches thick and had been propped open with several copies of the *1954 Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary.* Inside were wall-to-ceiling shelves with glass barriers that protected books from grabby hands.

Tim frowned at the glass barriers, disappointed. He wanted to knock some of the poetry collections off the wall. He liked how the spines bounced.

Jason stood by the back wall, shuffling awkwardly as he talked to a little old lady in plaid. The lady, Tim noticed, was holding the flowers Jason bought earlier, and looked bemused.

“As always, you’re free to stay as long as you’d like,” the old woman said. “It’s a pleasure having you here, young man. It’s so good to see people your age enthusiastic about the arts.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say I’m that cultured,” Jason coughed, face as red as his helmet, “just an amateur admirer.”

The old lady patted his back. “So humble! You know, an amateur is about the purest thing anyone can be. It means you pursue something out of love alone. Now, I’ll be up front. Holler if you need me.”

Cass shoved Tim and Steph behind a stack of gardening catalogs as the woman trundled out of the room. They held their breath until she was out of sight, then Steph burst into the vault.

“Dude, what the hell?” Steph said, pointing an accusing finger at Jason. “You’re dating a grandma? That’s sick!”

Jason jumped and almost touched the ceiling. “What are you talking about? And what are you doing here?”

Tim poked his head over Steph’s shoulder. “Looking for you. Are these books for sale? They look burnable.”

He bet they’d smell great if he toasted them.

Jason leapt in front of the books, arms spread wide. “Over my dead body. Now get talking. Why are you in my sanctuary?”

Tim made a disappointed noise. Why did Jason have to hoard stupid things?

“Stalking you. Bonding activity,” Cass said, shoving Jason away from the display case. “What this?”

“Nothing,” Jason said. “Go away, heathens. This is too good for you.”

Tim ducked under Jason’s arm to avoid being swatted, and frowned at the display. A small, innocuous book with a tiny informational plaque took center stage.

“A signed, first edition of *Frankenstein?”* Tim said in disappointment. “This is what you were drooling over?”

Date with “Mary,” sure. More like the date Tim realized the depths of his zombie’s obsession with ink and paper.

On the bright side, it wasn’t a human, so Tim didn’t need to emotionally scar them to keep them away from his human. On the downside, Mary Shelley’s masterpiece was a tiny, beat-up book that probably smelled like mold. What was the big deal?

“Lame,” Cass said, equally unimpressed.

“No, it’s not,” Jason said. “Don’t you dare diss my girl Mary over this. She’s a queen who revolutionized literature by creating the modern sci-fi genre—”

Tim tuned out Jason’s rant, and was glad to see Cass wasn’t paying attention either. She wasn’t much of a reader, and Tim preferred informational stuff like manuals or cold cases to novels. Fiction didn’t catch his interest.

“—one of the most influential books of its time,” Jason continued, getting more worked up. “The fact there’s a first edition here is a miracle. There’s nothing wrong with me coming to soak in its brilliance.”

“Dude,” Steph said. “Your planner says you’ve visited this place a dozen times in the last two weeks. You brought the owner *flowers*.”

“Of course I bought Joanne flowers, she’s an inspiration,” Jason said. “And why were you looking at my planner?!”

Tim rubbed his head. He was getting a headache from the noise and general stupidity of this entire situation.

“If you like it so much, why don’t you buy it?” Tim said, pointing to the price tag. “You can put it in your hoard.”

“Tim,” Jason said, a hand on his heart. “I’m not worthy of owning something like this. I’m but a worm, and this is the holy grail.”

“Oh, okay,” Tim said, not really getting it.

A book was a book. Who cared when it was printed? Jason was such a silly guy.

“So, to recap, you’re not meeting up with someone for a romantic date,” Steph said, looking disappointingly at her phone, which Tim knew she’d primed to take embarrassing photos. “You’re just living a nerd life. Man, you’re such a dweeb.”

“I literally own a crime empire,” Jason said. “I outsmarted Batman for over a month and evaded Oracle’s network while I was establishing myself. I’m *not* a dweeb.”

Tim and the girls looked at each other, then at the shrine to literature they were in.

“Simp,” Cass said.

Jason ran a hand over his face. “I hate this family. I’m *trying* to soak in the majesty of this book before it gets bought by a private collector at the auction next month. If you’re going to mock me for my hobbies, you can leave.”

“You could be that private collector,” Tim said, looking closer at the price tag.

The bids started at two-million-dollars, but Jason made a lot of money selling drugs, so he could probably afford it. Tim doubted anyone else would want to buy the book anyway. Jason would probably be the only guy who showed up. Maybe Joanne would give him a discount?

Jason snorted. “Buy it and what, hide it on an Ikea shelf in my apartment in Crime Alley? No thanks, Timbo. Shelley’s masterpiece deserves to go to somebody who can treat it right.” He sighed longingly and made heart eyes at the shelf. “She deserves the best.”

Tim took a large step back and pretended to gag.

“This is why you’re single,” Steph said. “You know that, right? You’ve got a bod like Adonis, but the nerdiness of a freshman chess-club player.”

“Cringe,” Cass agreed.

“You’re just uncultured,” Jason said, straightening his cuffs. He’d dressed up for his book date thing. “The finer things are wasted on you.”

He herded them away from the book and made them each buy a bookmark that said “It’s Lit” from the little old lady to support her local business. Personally, Tim figured her business was doing fine if she could afford to auction two-million-dollar books, but whatever. If it placated Jason, he’d buy all the bookmarks in the world.

“This was a waste of time,” Steph said as the three of them left MWS Books. Jason had stayed behind to bat his eyes at the bookshelf longer. “I can’t blackmail someone who has no dignity.”

“I’m just glad he’s not dating anybody,” Tim said. “Couples are the worst.”

It was bad enough that Dick spent all his time on his and Bab’s fake dating scheme. Tim didn’t want Jason to get so busy fawning over someone that Tim couldn’t spend time with him anymore. He’d have to resort to kidnapping again if that happened, and Jason was fussy about that.

“Don’t worry, Timmy,” Cass said. “Brother just being silly.”

“Very silly,” Tim agreed.

They went out for waffles and decided to leave the day’s events in the dust. Jason could have all the quality time with that lame book he wanted. Tim was going to waste his brain cells on something that actually mattered.

Like stealing the rest of Janet’s opals. She hadn’t given him the entire set, and he needed to complete the collection.

“What are you smiling for?” Steph asked. “That’s your scheming face.”

“I’m not scheming anything,” Tim said as their waiter arrived with the food. “I’m just excited about the dance retreat in a couple days. Right Cass?”

Cass looked up from her Snapchat with Kon and nodded enthusiastically. Tim felt his heart melt.

He should probably feel guilty about lying, but he *was* excited for extended hoard time with Cass. But he also had some family matters to attend to, and didn’t want anyone butting in.

Jack couldn’t mad if Tim broke into Drake manor to find the jewels. It wasn’t like he’d be fighting his mom. Just stealing her stuff.

And if he “coincidentally” ran into her during his heist, it’d hardly be his fault if they went to blows.

Chapter End Notes

"MWS" is the initials of Mary Shelley's name, so the shop is named after her.

I get perverse joy in Tim, Cass, and Steph being uncultured little gremlins. Poor Jason is such a catch, but they don't see the vision.

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

Ivy: I can do this. I can get certified sane, fix my life, and become worthy for Dr. Quinzel. This is my new goal.
Ex-director: How very responsible of you.
Ivy: At least try to sound excited.
Gary: I am! Congratulations on the first step to cleansing your soul.
Ivy: Thanks. When the plant uprising comes, I'll ask them to spare you.

Elsewhere:

Harley: If someone could just walk in here and break the Joker out, the security system can't be THAT good. It'd be SUCH a shame if someone helped Ms. Isley escape so she could be free and happy.

Security guard: Why do I feel a chill?

Dancing With Dragons

Chapter Summary

Tim and Cass prepare for their dance retreat. But first, Tim has some unfinished business with Janet.

Chapter Notes

I've been waiting for this chapter since last Fall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim double-checked the hinges on the window. Oiled. Excellent.

He silently eased himself onto the roof, breathing a sigh of relief as he balanced on the shingles. Escaping the manor was hard, but nobody knew he was up, and Bruce was still on patrol in Old Gotham. Now was the perfect time to fly to Drake Manor and fight Janet for the rest of her opals.

He still couldn't look at the ones she'd gifted him without blushing as red as a tomato. Janet was too nice for her own good. But he was sure she'd be proud of him for taking the rest of her treasure. That's what the gift had been, right? A challenge to go and seize the rest for himself.

(Tim was good at justifying things to himself. It was a skill he'd been refining for years. Besides, if he got warm fuzzies from just a few of her opals, he'd have even *more* once they were all his.)

"Finally, freedom," he muttered, letting his skin ripple and his wings start to form.

Shiny new gemstones, here he came.

"That's what you think," someone said right behind him.

Tim shrieked as he was yanked by his ankle. Dick braced himself against the sill and dragged Tim backward through the window, grunting from the effort.

“Dick, no, stop!” Tim said, flailing for purchase. His claws scratched the shingles. “Destiny calls and it has teeth!”

“Destiny says it's bedtime,” Dick growled, hauling Tim back inside like a fisherman with a bait line. “You literally promised not to do this.”

Tim hissed and smacked Dick in the face with a wing. “Promises expire after midnight. Release me!”

He’d been good for *weeks,* he deserved a cheat day.

“Do *not* make me grab my escrima sticks, Tim,” Dick said. “I swear to Kroger you're being difficult on purpose.”

Tim shrieked louder. Only the threat of nasty, hateful electricity stopped him from going full dragon and squishing Dick.

“You don't know what it's like,” Tim said, pointing in vain at Drake Manor in the distance. “I’m living next to my arch nemesis, she has to go down.”

“She's your *mother.”*

“And you're trying to make Gordon go gray, same difference,” Tim said. He kicked Dick's shoulder and wriggled toward freedom.

“Son of a—” Dick tackled him onto the ground. A lamp fell over and broke. “Cass! Alfred! Help! He's escaping!”

“Traitor!” Tim snarled as a blearily eyed Cass burst into the room, eye-mask still stuck to her forehead. “It was only going to be a little theft.”

And some light assault, with possible murder if things went well.

“Only thing you steal is my sleep,” Cass said, hair tangled and Care Bear pajamas askew. “Bad Timmy.”

She leapt forward with predatory grace, genuine annoyance on her face.

Tim put up a good fight and knocked a few antique vases onto the ground, but as Cass pounced on him, he had to face the facts; he’d been thwarted.

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Tim's attempt to sneak out and murder his mom did not go over well with the Waynes. The next morning, he got endless lectures about respect, the no-homo(cide) rule, and disappointing his humans. It was unfair, ridiculous, and boring.

Even worse, Tim hadn’t even got to fight his mom. Cass was too good a guard dog for her own good. At this rate, Tim would never be able to kill Janet properly.

“You agreed *not* to murder her,” Dick said at breakfast, sounding more worn out than threadbare clothes. “Stop trying to go back on your word.”

“It's the principle of the matter,” Tim said scathingly. “You wouldn’t get it.”

The longer he smelled her in his territory, the stronger his instincts got. Tim had been hoping he’d go nose-blind eventually, but the opposite seemed to be the case. His teeth ached with the need to sink them into her flank.

Dick crossed his arms, unimpressed, and started the lecture all over again.

Jack was even worse than Dick. He didn't even have to say anything when he found out. He just looked so *sad* that Tim apologized on instinct and gave him one of his favorite rocks. Parental disapproval was a terrible, evil weapon. Tim wanted it outlawed.

(Janet, for her part, didn't lecture Tim at all. She seemed as bummed at missing another fight to the near-death as he was. Neither of them got to maul things nearly enough. Proper dragon enrichment was hard to come by.)

The only silver lining was that Tim didn't have to put up with his humans' nonsense for long. His dance retreat with Cass was finally happening, and that meant freedom from judgy humans for an entire week.

"Don't come crawling back to me when the stray cat population bounces back," Tim said as he hauled his suitcase toward the car. Cass was already in it, bouncing in her seat. "Or when you need someone qualified to test for poison, or organize the house, or—"

"Your abilities shall be sorely missed," Alfred said, nudging Tim forward. "But your duty is to enjoy your vacation, not worry about us."

"Like I can do that," Tim grumbled. "You're helpless without me."

As soon as he was gone, there'd be another dead sidekick, an Arkham breakout, or something else gone wrong. Tim was the Waynes' good luck charm (as seen by Jason coming back to life after Tim became Robin) and he didn't like the idea of leaving them alone for so long.

He shuddered, skin crawling at the thought of his hoard in danger. Why had he agreed to go to Vermont? This was giving him anxiety.

"We'll contact you every night," Alfred said, squeezing Tim's shoulder. "Rest assured, you'll know if there's a problem."

"I'd still be too far away to *do* anything about the problem. That's the real problem, Alfred." Tim muttered mulishly, but this was the best compromise he was going to get. He'd just have to deal.

He threw his suitcase in the back of the Jeep and pouted.

Charlotte was driving them to Vermont for the dance retreat. She and Cass had an entire playlist of obnoxious pop music, and Tim had brought several pairs of earplugs in preparation. (His breaking glass ASMR soundtracks had been banned, since they were all three to four hours long and other people didn't find them as relaxing as he did. Killjoys.)

Before Tim could get in the backseat with his hoard member, Bruce stumbled out of the manor in his pajamas, yawning heavily.

"Have fun, champ," he said, patting Tim on the head, then paused in confusion and did it again. He was probably too out of it to know where he was.

"No promises," Tim said, but let himself get one last head pat before shaking Bruce off. He hoped nobody ever found out how much he liked those. It was on par with his love of coffee.

"Mm," Bruce said. It was unclear if he'd heard Tim at all. Morning Bruce didn't have high cognitive function.

"I'll see master Bruce back to bed. Have fun now," Alfred said, shooing Tim away.

Tim stuck his tongue out and got into the vehicle. Charlotte had brought a cherry red Jeep with AWD and massive suspension. It looked more like something used to explore the Russian tundra than travel the idyllic Vermont mountains. Tim hoped it had comfy seats. Bruce wasn't the only one that was tired.

He got in the backseat with Cass and yawned, prepared for a long drive snoozing on her lap.

A familiar, hateful scent almost choked him.

Tim coughed in alarm and wiped his tongue on his jacket to get the smell out of his mouth. The interior of the Jeep tasted like someone had dumped a bottle of body wash on the floor, then mixed it with Gatorade.

He knew this scent. It haunted his nightmares like the ghost of Trauma Past.

“Cass, what’s going—” Tim made the mistake of looking up, and felt the blood drain from his face.

Charlotte—pure muscle and the size of a mountain—peeked over the passenger seat. Her corn-silk hair was pulled into a low ponytail, and her nose had a fresh bandage on it. She looked the same as ever, but Tim could finally place why she was so familiar.

The reason was in the driver’s seat. It was tall, buff, and an evolutionary mistake.

“Hey, little buddy,” Chad, Tim’s bodyguard last year during the Red Hood fiasco, said. “Long time no see! Still as shrimpy as ever. I like it. Stay short and fight the system, bro. The world needs more fun-sized men.”

Tim made a sound between a shriek and a wheeze. It would’ve sounded more impressive if he’d remembered to open his mouth.

“Oh, I forgot,” Charlotte said, grinning at Tim. “You already know my brother, Chadwick. Excellent! This saves time on introductions.”

“Brother?” Tim managed faintly. *“Chadwick?”*

Charlotte and Chad exchanged a fist-bump so manly it was surprising that neither sprouted a mustache right there.

“Correcto,” Chad said, slipping on a pair of neon sunglasses. “Lottie and I’ve been a squad since we were repping laps around the kiddie pool. She’s a homie. I help pay for her dance lessons, but even protection detail doesn’t cover all the bills. So, I’m volunteering at the camp this week for a discount, and figured I’d drive you all down while I was at it.”

Tim was having an out-of-body experience, much like the main character of a cosmic horror story. He saw the similarities between them now; the square jaws, the rippling muscles, the pale blond hair. How hadn't Tim recognized it sooner?

"It's like a family vacation *and* a life-changing camp," Charlotte said, oblivious to Tim's reality-shattering realizations. "Rad, right?"

Cass gave a double thumbs up. "Double rad!"

Tim looked at his hoard member in betrayal. Why did she sound so happy? This was the *opposite* of good.

"Hell yeah, double rad!" Chad said, mimicking her thumbs up, then started driving. Charlotte did an air guitar to sell the moment.

Tim tried the door handle as the Jeep started heading down the drive, but it didn't open. The child-safety locks had been activated.

"No, no, no, no," Tim breathed.

He couldn't do this. Chad had been insufferable last year, and those had been galas where Tim could outrun him when he needed space. This was an *enclosed vehicle* heading to the *middle of nowhere* for an entire week of bro-time. Tim would go insane if he was lucky. Worst case, he'd devolve into a dude-bro just to survive. This was hell on earth. If he'd known Charlotte and Chad were related he'd never have agreed to—

"You knew," Tim whispered, staring at Cass with new horror.

His most treacherous hoard member batted her eyes guilelessly. "Knew what?"

Tim turned around and banged his fists on the rear window. "Let me out! *Let me ooooout! "*

Bruce and Alfred waved from the front steps, probably mistaking Tim's pleas for an enthusiastic goodbye.

Tim prayed to every god in existence to free him from this nightmare, but no benevolent deities answered his calls. Neither did Kon or Superman. They'd forsaken him, just like his hoard.

Tim tried to break the window and run for the woods, but Cass casually nerve-struck him in the neck, and Chad turned on ABBA at full-blast. The entire car started singing along off-key as they trundled toward the highway.

Tim realized he'd packed his earplugs in his suitcase instead of his backpack, and resigned himself to suffer until they got to Vermont.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all had such high hopes for Charlotte's secret. Sorry, she's not a mythical creature. Just related to Tim's former bodyguard. 😂

Meanwhile:

Kon: Robin is screaming for me to rescue him.
Cassie: You should probably do that.
Kon: Nah. Black Bat told me this would happen. He's fine.
Cassie: You're such a simp for her.
Kon: And proud of it!

Curses Come Home To Roost

Chapter Summary

Cass suffers the consequences of her own prank.

Chapter Notes

This chapter gave me grief, but ultimately I'm happy with how it turned out. Even though it's longer than expected *glares at my word count*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Dance Camp took place in a small town deep in the Green Mountains, hidden from the hustle and bustle of city life. It was an oasis of serenity designed to make people reflect on the beauty of the natural world; the cabins were hand carved oak, the dance hall was fitted with wall-to-ceiling mirrors, and the forests were cluttered with maples, Queen Anne's Lace, and chicory.

Tim endured it like a soldier in enemy territory. Serenity his ass. This place didn't even have WiFi! But that wasn't the worst part.

Chad and Charlotte were a force of nature. Despite being in ballet practice for eight hours a day, Tim couldn't escape them. Either Charlotte was hanging with him and Cass during free practice to show Tim the best way to fold himself into a pretzel, or Chad was crashing their meals and giving them tours of maple farms after classes were over, fouling the woods with the stench of his existence.

There was no release. No escape. Only suffering.

“They want you have fun,” Cass said at night on the second day, after Tim spent twenty minutes bemoaning his fate, “not be alone.”

“I like being alone!” Tim hissed as he opened a new bottle of scented lotion. He was slathering himself with it to get the smell of Gatorade out of his nose.

The other campers avoided him like the plague and flinched whenever he got too close. They had good instincts, unlike the blond terrors. Neither Chad nor Charlotte feared Tim's unsettling aura. Or, if they did, they didn't mention it. It was *super* annoying. Tim hadn't spend a decade cultivating an intimidating public persona only for two idiots to be oblivious to it. Where was the justice?

“This is all your fault, Cass,” Tim muttered, glaring at his lotion-covered hands. “I hope you're happy.”

Locked room socialization should be illegal. He was going to get back at her for this . . . Somehow. Maybe. If he remembered to hold a grudge.

Cass rolled her eyes and went back to doing her evening stretches, unsympathetic to Tim's woes.

***

On day four, Tim abandoned his afternoon classes and fled into the woods.

There were too many hikers nearby for transforming near the cabins to be worth the risk, but years of vigilantism made him an excellent sprinter.

When he got a couple miles away from the retreat, he put his hands on his knees and gulped for breathe. Fresh country air filled his lungs, but under the smoky scent of maple sugar the ever-present odor of *Chad* lingered on Tim.

“I deserve reparations,” Tim said, skin crawling. “French kissing Kite-Man would've been better.”

Okay, that was a lie, but *barely.* Tim had signed up for the dance camp to have a good time with Cass, but instead he was being tormented and attacked. Chad had insisted on giving him a chest bump after lunch. Tim hadn't wanted a chest bump, but he hadn't been quick enough to say so. Now he was another traumatized victim of male bonding.

There were only three more days of the retreat, but Tim was done. Screw the NYC recital, Cass could do that on her own. Tim needed quality time away from gross gym-bros and their buff sisters.

So, running into the woods it was.

“At least Dad will be happy,” Tim said, eying the forest, which was teeming with bugs, animals, and strange sounds. Light filtered through the trees, painting everything with dappled sunshine. “I'm finally doing a solo camping trip.”

Wilderness survival was *not* his wheelhouse, but Tim would take it over being forced to socialize with a gym-bro any day.

***

For the first time, well, ever, Tim was staying in dragon shape full time. It was a refreshing change of pace, and the temporary break from his hoard had its perks. Tim didn't know how much longer he'd be able to spend time away from them like this, so he was trying to savor it.

Still . . . Without any rogues to fight, cold cases to crack, or rocks to arrange, Tim was growing bored. The fact that he *still* didn't have Internet wasn't helping. He needed more stimuli, and a lot more things to maul.

Tim's mind strayed to Slobo. If he got cell signal, he could schedule another fight to the near death. Or text Bart for memes. Both were valid options.

Except, if he did that, it was only a matter of time before the Bats tracked him down.

So far, Tim had avoided detection because his phone was useless—and currently nonexistent, since he'd transformed with it in his pocket. Tim had no idea where his clothes went when he shifted, but he wasn't questioning it. Babs couldn't track something that didn't exist, so he was safe.

But if they *did* find him, it'd be lectures until sunset. No thank you. He'd deal with the consequences of liberating himself later. For now, it was Tim-time.

Over the next two days, Tim made it his mission to stay as far from humanity as possible. He wasn't used to hiding in trees instead of skyscrapers, but he made it work. The dance instructors would have to pry him out of the woods with crowbars.

Luckily, Vermont was so green that even Tim's scarlet scales were swallowed by the verde, so camouflaging was going well. Plus, there were hundreds of lakes and creeks for him to submerge in.

Tim didn't get to play in clean water often, so he was enjoying impersonating a crocodile. Several deer and a stray moose had the honor of being his first victims. Dragging them under the surface and drowning them while they floundered was giggle-worthy. Next time Tim saw Killer Croc, he was reprising this strategy.

Occasionally, he heard humans nearby calling his name and talking on radios. Once or twice, he even caught Cass' scent on the wind. When that happened, he either sank deeper into the water to hide, or slunk deeper into the mountains to outrun them. It was a flawless strategy.

Eventually, Tim got far enough away that he doubted the humans would *ever* find him, and sighed in relief; peace, at long last.

He found a small clearing with a comfy knoll in the center, and curled up on it, determined to pay back his sleep debt. Sunlight warmed his scales as he wrapped himself into a coil, and a gentle breeze ran its fingers over his horns. Tim purred as he got comfortable, letting a wisp of smoke escape from between his teeth.

Sleep crept up on him, relaxed and restful. Tim welcomed it with a content yawn.

It didn't get better than this.

***

Tim wrinkled his nose as the sound of an approaching aircraft woke him up a few hours later. Plane engines were way too loud. Tim wished he was allowed to dive-bomb them. It would be the perfect

way to fight noise pollution, which fit in with his Robin brand.

Tim rolled over, determined to ignore the noise.

But moments later it stopped.

Stopped?

Tim cracked an eye open, confused. There wasn't a landing pad or a runway nearby, so how—

“Timothy Jackson Drake,” a familiar, irritated voice yelled. Several dozen birds took flight from the canopy. *“Get out here this instant!”*

Tim bolted upright, wings unfurled in alarm as the newcomer crashed into his clearing.

Dick Grayson crossed his arms as he glared at Tim. He was dressed in threadbare sweats and covered in leaves. He glared at Tim like he was personally responsible for the third world war.

Tim blinked to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. What was *he* doing here?

***

It turned out, running off into the woods without telling anybody was a quick and easy way to become a missing person case. *Staying* in the woods to protest Cass' abuse of hoard time just made it worse.

Tim took a moment to process that. . . He probably should have pretended to quit the camp due to illness, rather than vanish into the forest like a cryptid. But, to be fair, Tim hadn't thought that far ahead.

The Dance instructors had called Tim's guardians to report the situation, which meant Tim's overworked, overstressed, parentally-deluded hoard member had overreacted and stolen the Batplane to scour the woods for Tim.

There weren't runways nearby, but the Batplane could hover, and Tim been in full view from the sky, so Dick just had to fly low over the woods until he spotted him. Tim had never felt so betrayed by technology as he did right now.

"—can't believe you did something like this," Dick said. He'd been lecturing Tim for nearly an hour. "After all our talks about common sense, you should know better. This is *not* how you lie low as a civilian, Tim."

Tim growled and rolled over. It wasn't worth the effort of transforming to plead his case. Dick wouldn't understand. He *liked* people.

"Don't give me that," Dick said. "You're lucky I'm the one who found you. Cass is pissed."

Cass?

Tim recalled suddenly that he'd been working on choreography with her for the NYC recital. The two of them were going to perform together.

Shit.

Tim shifted so fast he got a cramp in his back. "She's going to kill me! Dick, you have to let me hide in the Arctic. It's my only hope."

If he was fast enough, he could hide in Superman's Fortress of Solitude until her wrath went from a boil to a simmer.

Dick grabbed Tim's collar and hauled him toward the Batplane. "Nice try. You're not getting out of this. She told me to tell you that you're a dick, and she's going to make you suffer."

“Suffer? No, let go!” Tim said, grabbing onto a sapling. A handful of leaves broke off as his hands slid off the branch. “Dick, have mercy!”

Cass was being unfair. She was the mastermind for this entire situation. It wasn't Tim's fault that he'd gotten sick of playing along with her sick, twisted games.

“Mercy?” Dick pinned him with bloodshot eyes. “I had to use another one of my days off to find you, *and* reschedule Operation Final Girl. I say, let Cass do what she wants with you.”

Tim gasped. “What's wrong with you, Dick? You didn't used to be like this. Dating has turned you against me.”

That stupid fake-dating fiasco was nightmare-fuel, and Tim wasn't even the person Dick and Babs were trying to torture.

“No, *you've* turned me against you,” Dick said without heat. “These are called consequences, Tim. You run away from ballet, ergo you lose trust. It's that simple.”

“Excuses! You're lucky I don't hold get mad at hoard,” Tim said, “or you'd all be in hot water.”

He got annoyed, sure, but when Tim's temper snapped he dismembered people and fed the pieces to piranhas. The Chad situation was peanuts compared to losing a hoard member, but Tim was still irritated. He'd reacted nonviolently, yet was being treated like the villain.

Sure, running away and getting local law-enforcement involved with tracking him down wasn't *good,* but it was better than half the ways he could've dealt with being stuck socializing with people he didn't like. Some gratitude for his self-control would be nice.

Tim kicked Dick's shin to destabilize him, and hissed in irritation when it didn't work. Consequences were for other people, not him. He was the victim this time! The next time Tim didn't like someone, he'd just bite them. That'd show the Waynes how well behaved he'd been this week.

“I'm not paid enough for this,” Dick grumbled as he hauled Tim through a cluster of daylilies.

“Nobody asked you to come get me,” Tim reminded him, debating if it was worth it to transform again and escape. “You could've stayed in Gotham, where you belong.”

Dick looked as well rested as a starved possum looked dignified. Which was to say, not remotely.

“Babs can't search places without cameras,” Dick said. He threw Tim over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and kept walking. “Cass is staying with the dance group so she can still perform, Alfred doesn't deserve to get eaten alive by mosquitoes looking for you, Bruce is neck deep in a case, and Jason's not answering my calls. So, *yes,* I had to come.”

Not for the first time, Tim wondered what possessed Dick to put so much on his plate. Even as flexible as he was, he shouldn't be stretching himself this far.

Dick kicked open the door to the Batplane and dropped Tim into the passenger seat. “Don't worry, kiddo, there's still time to salvage this. The recital starts in a few hours, but we can make it. You can apologize to Cass, do your number together, and put all this behind us.”

“Easy for you to say,” Tim said, sinking into the seat. “Maybe I don't want to apologize. This was awful. You wouldn't get it.”

Chad wasn't even being mean. He was just icky, smelly, and not a human Tim wanted to interact with. Ever. Having to tolerate his presence for so long was a special hell.

“I grew up around Babs. Arguably, I had it worse,” Dick said dryly, and booted up the plane.

Tim thunked his head against the window and sighed. He could still run. Live in the woods a few more days, procrastinate his reckoning. He got a taste of how easy it was to dominate the food chain out here. If he wanted, he could hide so well that Cass would never torment him with gym humans again.

But, as always, running came with it's own host of problems. Sooner or later Tim would have to go back to his hoard. Delaying the inevitable was a valid strategy, but sometimes it was better to rip the bandaid off. If he could make things up to Cass now, he should.

“Fine, I'll go,” Tim said. “I didn't mean to upset her.”

“For the record, I didn't think she expected you to run away,” Dick said, giving Tim a terse smile. “So it probably evens out. Don't worry, Timmy, everything's going to be fine.”

The Batplane took to the air. Takeoff was slightly rough and there was a lot of turbulence. Tim sighed again. Great, now he'd have to perform at the recital while motion sick. This sucked.

***

Dick was a lying liar. Nothing was “even” and everything was miserable.

“It's not fair, Alfred,” Tim said. He was splayed across the floor of the kitchen, lower body shifted like a naga so he could mope properly while still being able to whine. “Cass hasn't talked to me in a week.”

Even worse, she'd mixed some of his coffee grounds with Coco-Puffs and put googly-eyes on half his rocks. His hoard was a mess, and to top it all off, Bruce had assigned him an extra ten hours at WE per week as punishment for faking his disappearance, so Tim didn't even have time to fix it.

“I'm being neglected,” Tim whined, scratching new grooves on the marble tile. “She wants me to die.”

He wasn't built to function without constant hoard time. Was it his fault his love language was quality time? No, and Cass was being evil by denying him it. It didn't help that Jason was still ignoring everyone's calls, and Bart was visiting him mom in the future. Tim was running low on hoard members his age to hang out with, and it was effecting his mood. Even Tam was giving him concerned looks, and Tam didn't *get* concerned. That was how low Tim had sunken.

His only solace was that Bruce grounded Cass too. For once Bruce hadn't brushed off Tim's dislike of random people, and told Cass to choose nicer pranks. Apparently, even though Tim “whined a lot” and was a “pill when it came to socializing,” him actually running away proved to the Waynes that the Surprise Chad Special had gone too far.

“We want Tim to make friends, not use forced socializing to make him miserable,” Bruce had said as he packaged up all of Cass' video game consoles. “No Wii or Kinnect until August.”

Cass had hissed liked a dragon when she heard that, and had been sulking ever since. Her petty vengeance on Tim started shortly after.

Tim, meanwhile, had been starstruck. Bruce was actually taking *Tim's* side for once, and it felt unreal. Tim still couldn't think about his favorite human without purring and getting emotional. He liked his feelings being validated. It made him warm and fuzzy.

But that still didn't change the fact that Tim was miserable because of Cass withdrawal.

Alfred stepped over Tim and removed a dish from the oven. “She does not want you dead, master Tim. This is simply reaping what you've sown.”

Tim pouted, which was hard when his front teeth were shifted into needle-sharp points. “That's a stupid analogy. I've sown nothing. Dragons don't even *do* agriculture.”

Although Tim wouldn't be surprised if there was a weird, farm-obsessed dragon hoarding potatoes somewhere. To each their own.

Alfred took off his oven mitts and patted Tim's head. “From my understanding, she's irritated on several fronts. But abandoning her during an activity she was excited to do *with* you seems to be one of the most important. I'm sure she didn't mean for her . . . Exuberant friends . . . To distress you so. Still, perhaps in the future, you shouldn't “rebel” against humanity in ways that ricochet onto you as well.”

“It wasn't supposed to.” Tim scratched one of the floor tiles and sulked. He'd only been missing for 55 hours. Hardly anything to be concerned about. “And I *am* sorry for missing the dance, but it's not like it matters. Cass won first place, so it worked out.”

Several ballet teams had scouted her as well, and the papers were going nuts with headlines about her mad skills. Bruce Wayne's daughter was trending in the dance world as a new, up-and-coming performer, and had completely eclipsed the articles about Tim's vanishing act. She hadn't needed him there at all.

“I believe you'll find it very much *does* matter,” Alfred said. “But no matter. Simply give her space, and I'm sure in a few weeks this will be water under the bridge. And if not, perhaps we can communicate about it like a proper hoard. Now, be a good lad and gather everyone for dinner. I don't want the food to get cold.”

Tim gathered himself off the floor with what little dignity he could muster. “A few weeks? Alfie, that's basically forever. What am I supposed to do until then? Curl up in a ball and die?”

Giving people space hardly seemed like a good way to smooth things over. Tim wanted a solution with immediate results. Like arson. Surely that would help.

Alfred tutted fondly. “You have plenty of other friends to spend your days with while Miss Cassandra wallows. I'm sure they'd be delighted with your company.”

Tim scoffed and opened his mouth to sass something back, then slowly closed it. That . . . Was a good point.

“I guess it's been a while since I've seen Cassie,” Tim said. “Or Anita, Greta, or everyone else.”

They'd been hanging out on the weekends, but Tim had been distracted with his parents' return to Gotham, and hadn't gone back to Mount Justice in a couple of weeks. He should change that.

“Do you think they'll want to solve cold cases with me?” Tim said. “Or maybe do forensics at crime scenes. That's also pretty fun. Oh! Or we can track down those teleporting laser-gun smugglers!”

Tim was working on figuring out where their base was located. Destroying it with the team would be a great bonding activity.

Alfred nudged him to the door. “Why don't you start with something a little easier, then ease them into that. Perhaps Parcheesi, or Monopoly. Now, run along, lad. I need to plate the food.”

“Oh, right. Thanks, Alfie,” Tim said.

He padded out of the kitchen with a skip in his step, and ran off to find his hoard for dinner. While everyone was gathered, he'd have to ask them for advice on more group activities. He was still adjusting to being on a team with not-quite-hoard members, and didn't want to mess up again.

Hmm. In that case, he should ignore anything Bruce said. Listening to Dick seemed like a safer bet.

Chapter End Notes

Cass is still learning social cues, and what buttons she can push. She didn't think Tim would be bothered THAT much. (To be fair, it was the combination of Chad and no WiFi that made him so desperate. Tim needs his screen time, or he goes feral). Bruce is making sure she learns there are consequences for tormenting her siblings, just like he's reminding Tim that RUNNING AWAY is not appropriate, especially since their civilian identities are meant to lie low.

Meanwhile,

Bruce: Chadwick, for the last time, Tim's alright. He just got overwhelmed and took a walk to get some space. It wasn't your fault that he got lost in the woods.
Chad: No, B-dog, it was. I forgot the little man takes a while to warm up to people. That's on me. I need to level-up my awareness skills.
Bruce: I mean, yes, but--
Chad: He's just a little guy in a big world. The teenage years are rough. I was beanpole back then, but I sprouted. Now, my social skills will sprout as well.
Bruce: ...That's great, Chadwick. You go and do that. I'm going to have a stiff drink.

Later, at MWS Books,

Chad: Aunty Jo! You got any paper about max-piling emotional competency?
Joanne: *sigh* the self-help section is over here.

Small Talk Is For Sissies

Chapter Summary

Tim and Cass make up.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, I'm back~

Sorry for the long delay. Long story short, I was pushing myself to release chapters too often and got burnt out. I took a step back and wrote without posting to build a better chapter buffer. Since I'm starting grad school, I'll be releasing the rest of Part 4 on a weekly basis so I won't overwhelm myself again. Thanks for all your comments, they've kept me excited about this story during my break. ❤️

As always, a big thanks to Ravengranger for being my awesome beta. I literally couldn't do it without her. 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the end of the day, making up with Cass was simple. Tim just had to find the right person to help him understand how to do it.

Bruce was out because he was so emotionally constipated he made rocks look intelligent, Dick and Jason were no-gos because they were in the “running away without telling anyone is wrong and gets you beaten to death in Ethiopian warehouses” camp, Alfred just said to rely on positive thinking, and everyone else in Tim’s hoard was full of stupid advice on communicating.

Tim hated it. He didn’t want to communicate. That was for humans and morons, of which he was neither.

Thus, there was only one person he could go to for wisdom.

“Tam, you have siblings,” he said, slumping over her desk at WE. “How do you make them stop being mad at you?”

Tam looked up from where she was updating Lucius's itinerary. Her hair was getting longer, and her mouth was pursed in a constant frown. "What?"

"Cass is upset with me," Tim said with an even deeper sigh. "I did a thing, but she did something first, and now we're in a cold war."

There was plenty of blame to go around, and nobody's hands were clean. Ironically, that made it even harder to bury the hatchet. Cass was *petty.* Unfortunately, so was Tim. (He may or may not have buried her ballet shoes in the garden to get back at her for putting Googly eyes on his rocks.)

"Have either of you apologized?" Tam said.

"Kind of," Tim said.

He'd said "my bad" when he got to the recital with five minutes to spare, but Dick told Tim he might want to try something more formal and sincere. Tim didn't want to do that. He *felt* sorry, and that was close enough. Verbal apologies were stupid.

"In my defense, she hasn't said sorry either," Tim said when Tam raised her eyebrows.

There had been what could be argued as an attempt a few days ago when Cass gave him a cookie, but she hadn't actually said anything. And she stole the cookie back before he could take a bite of it, so it was a moot point.

"I miss hanging out with her," Tim said. "In your professional opinion, how should peace be restored?"

Tam was a master at passive-aggression, so she doubtlessly knew exactly how to start *and* end it.

"I hate to break it to you, but siblings are always mad at each other," Tam said. "Last week, Tiffany ate Luke's last Jell-O cup, and they've been at each other's throats ever since. Just accept the blood

lust, it's natural."

Tim narrowed his eyes. This sounded suspiciously like what he and Janet had been telling Jack for years. Why did Tam understand when his dad didn't? They were both humans. Surely, that was enough overlap.

Then again, Jack had been an only child. He wasn't knowledgeable in the ways of sibling relationships. Neither were any of the Waynes.

"So, what should I do?" Tim asked, deciding to listen to the expert.

"Assert your dominance," Tam said as she rescheduled one of Lucius's meetings to overlap with a dentist appointment. "Sometimes, the only way to find peace is violence. She'll respect you for it. Probably. And if she doesn't, it'll be a great way to relieve stress."

Tim rolled his chair closer to her in awe. "Who are you to be so wise in the ways of science?"

This was Bart-level advice. He should've come to her sooner.

"As the eldest daughter, I have a few tricks up my sleeve," she said blandly. "Now leave me alone. I need to concentrate for this next bit, and your breath smells like garlic and Reese's."

Tim lurched to his feet. "'Kay, thanks. You're a good human, Tam. Never change."

He headed back to his desk, glad he had chosen to utilize her expertise. Tam stared after him, visibly confused.

"Why did you phrase it like that?" she asked.

Tim paid her no mind. He had a duel to arrange.

***

Tim waited until dinner to strike. Once Alfred went to the kitchen to grab more water, Tim jumped onto his seat and threw a glove at Cass' face. She caught it on instinct, then stared at it curiously.

"I challenge you to a fight," Tim said.

"To death?" Cass said.

"To the pain," Tim clarified. "Winner gets an apology for causing the worst dance camp ever."

Cass dropped the glove to crack her knuckles. Smugness radiated off her. "Deal."

"Sweet," Tim said. And, because he was annoyed from nearly two weeks of cold shoulders and general irritability, added, "Biting is allowed."

Cass's eyes widened. Alfred stepped back into the room just as Tim leapt forward and tackled her out of the chair, transforming while he was airborne.

There were a lot of good ways to fight dragons, but hand-to-hand was not one of them. Cass's mastery of pressure points meant she *could* still win, but Tim was vindictively pleased that it'd be much harder.

There were perks to being a shape-shifter. Gnawing on his grumpy hoard members was one of them.

***

The rumbling of an engine was loud enough to make Tim stir, his human limbs the consistency of laffy taffy. He raised his head off the floor and glared at the motorcycle as it entered the cave.

“Tim? Cass?” Dick said as he got off the bike. “You okay?”

“Never better,” Tim said, going limp once more.

Cass gave a shaky thumbs-up from her spot on the floor next to him.

Dick walked over, eyebrows climbing as he got a look at them. It wasn’t a pretty sight. After Alfred had pulled them apart mid-brawl, they’d gone downstairs to duke it out. The three minutes it had taken to get to the cave had been filled with pantomimed throat-slitting and trash talk. Once they started fighting again, no words had been needed.

Tam was right; this was great stress relief. Tim hadn’t known how annoyed he was at Cass until he was wrestling her into the ground. Clearly, violence was the best language for them to communicate with. From now on, it’d be how they solved all of their problems.

Of course, now both he and Cass were limp, sweaty noodles. Movement was not happening ever again. They were becoming one with the mats.

“How long were you sparring?” Dick asked, poking Cass with his toe. She grumbled and rolled sluggishly away.

“What time is it?” Tim asked.

“Half an hour before patrol,” Dick said.

Tim and Cass groaned. That wasn’t long enough for the naps, spa day, and health retreat they needed to recover from this. Crime-fighting was going to suck tonight. Tim’s only comfort was that Cass was just as tired as he was. While she was an excellent fighter, getting a joint lock on Tim when he had more vertebrae than the rest of the family combined was a nightmare. Tim was finally learning to dodge Cass’ nerve strikes too, so she’d actually had to work to take him down. He hadn’t won, but he hadn’t *lost* either, which was a new personal record for his spars with her.

“Are you guys getting along now?” Dick asked, poking them with his toe again.

Cass and Tim both rolled away from him and his hateful physical touch. Cass even hissed.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Dick said.

“We learned a life hack for communicating,” Tim said into the mats. “The trick is to not do it.”

Cass nodded and gave another thumbs-up.

“That’s the wrong life lesson,” Dick said.

“Nobody asked you,” Cass said.

Dick sighed. “The disrespect in this house is why I stay with Babs most nights.”

Tim unpeeled himself from the floor. “I thought that was to annoy Gordon?”

Dick shrugged. “That too. But I also get to make out with her, so there are a lot of reasons.”

Cass threw her sweaty sock at Dick’s face. “Gross. Romance stupid.”

“You’re literally dating Superboy,” Dick sputtered, wiping his tongue on his sleeve. Cass had good aim.

“No, broke up this week,” Cass said casually. “Told him he is minion, like Timmy. No romo.”

“What?” Tim perked up. “You did? Great!”

No longer would romance sully Young Justice. The team would finally go back to the platonic ideal. This was the best news ever. Tim rolled over and flopped on top of her to show his appreciation. She wheezed as the air left her lungs, then made *Tim* wheeze by elbowing him in the ribs. He growled and moved to bite her ear, but Dick lifted him up by his shirt collar before he could.

“Fight’s over. No more biting,” Dick said. “You need to get ready for patrol.”

Tim turned wide, betrayed eyes toward his bendy human. They’d been fighting for nearly an hour, and now Dick wanted them to do *more* stuff? Cruel, evil human. That was the devil talking.

“Can we stay home?” Tim said. “Please?”

He wanted to bury himself in pillows until the world ended.

“I don’t mind, but you promised to scope the Iceberg Lounge with Batman,” Dick said. “If you want to play hooky, you’ll have to deal with him moping about not getting to spend one-on-one time with you.”

Oh, that was a good point. Tim and Bruce hadn’t had a lot of Batman & Robin adventures in a while. If he ditched, Bruce would probably sink into a depressive hole for the rest of the night, listening The Cure and The Sisters of Mercy to drown his sorrows.

“Actually, patrol sounds great,” Tim said. Anything to stop Bruce from sinking so low.

“Great. You too, Cass,” Dick said. “Babs you to test some new equipment for her.”

Dick tried to get Cass to her feet, but she used her dead weight to stay on the floor.

“Leave me. Become one with earth,” Cass said. “Rotting. Dying. Dead.”

She pretended to faint. Tim saw the exact moment Dick pegged her as a lost cause.

“Alright, fine. I’ll let Babs know,” he said. “Come on, Tim. Let’s get ready. Penguin’s got something in the wings, and we could use your ears.”

“Fine,” Tim grumbled, looking longingly at the floor. It seemed so comfortable. So tempting. “But I better be allowed to bite him.”

It was the only thing that’d make skipping his nap worth it. Cass didn’t pull her punches.

“As long as you don’t take a chunk out of him, I think that can be arranged,” Dick said, ruffling Tim’s hair. “Have I ever told you how hilarious he sounds when he gets whacked? He quacks. It’s very funny.”

Cass perked up, intrigued.

Tim was also excited. No, that didn’t do his feelings justice. He was *ecstatic.*

“You’ll let me bite him?” he said, certain he’d misheard.

“No blood, missing pieces, or excess trauma,” Dick said. “Those are my rules.”

Dick’s rules were way less strict than Bruce’s. He was giving Tim permission to bite? To *maul?* Tim wasn’t missing patrol for anything.

“Bye, Cass, have fun decomposing,” Tim said. He sprinted for the lockers.

“No, want to bite too!” Cass said, hot on his heels.

They crashed into each other by the lockers. A brief beetle battle ensued while they grabbed their uniforms. Halfway through, Cass gave him a wet willy and Tim responded by nipping playfully at her arm, then tried to chew on her hair.

Cass shoved him off, and the familiar back and forth Tim's heart warm. It'd been too long since they tussled properly. He'd missed being her ragdoll.

"Ready to harass some crime bosses?" Tim asked her once they were suited up.

"Born ready," Cass said, pulling on her cowl.

"Glad you're both so energetic," Dick said dryly, leaning against the Batmobile. "I wish I was your age again."

"Lame old man," Cass said, while Tim rolled his eyes beside her.

The three of them got into the Batmobile. Shotgun was left empty so Tim and Cass could hang out together in the back. Dick turned on a pop playlist and started briefing them on the Penguin case while he drove.

Tim leaned against Cass and felt a purr build in his chest. "It's good to have you back."

She rested her chin on the crown of his head. "Yes. Missed you too, Timmy."

Things were finally back to the way they were supposed to be. Tim knew some of his humans had hoped he and Cass would have made up by talking, but sometimes, the best way to communicate was without words. Their grudges were water under the bridge now, and Tim was ready to move on.

He'd have to thank Tam for the awesome sibling advice. Clearly, she knew what she was doing.

Chapter End Notes

I do not endorse Tam's conflict resolution skills. The only reason they worked this time was because Tim and Cass are Tim and Cass. The Fox children are in constant warfare, and Lucius hasn't known peace since he became a father. ;)

Horrible Hobbies for Silly Speedsters

Chapter Summary

Tim discovers that there *are* limits to what he'll let Bart get away with.

Chapter Notes

What you're about to see is the rare instance of Timothy Drake setting a boundary. Leading experts on dragons have stated that this is a once-in-a-life occurrence with no guarantee of happening again.

On an unrelated note, my semester starts next week. I'm going to try and update regularly, but fair-warning that depending on my workload, it'll be more sporadic.

Also, *waves at Raven* I put in a cameo for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Outside, the late July heat baked Gotham's streets. Humidity clung to the pavement while the hateful sun fused with the smog in an ever-present scourge. However, all that was preferable to the horrors that awaited Tim if he stayed inside. WE was no longer a safe place. This internship had been a trap from the get-go, and he needed to escape.

"Tam, hide me!" He whisper-shouted, bursting onto the intern floor with speedster dexterity.

"What?" she said, looking up from a folder of graphs.

There wasn't time to explain. Tim ran over, shoved her chair aside, and hid under the desk.

"Tim!" she hissed, kicking him. "Get out, I'm in a skirt—"

He grabbed her calves and yanked the chair back in place. "Shh, he'll find me. Please."

She opened her mouth to say something. Tim cringed as he heard heavy footsteps approach.

“Miss Fox?” Bruce said from the doorway. “Have you seen Tim?”

Tim—crammed into the tightest ball imaginable—made a pleading gesture at his only ally in the building. Tam wasn’t a merciful creature, but (literally) throwing himself at her feet was his only hope. If she sold him out, Tim’s life was forfeit.

Tam closed her eyes for a moment, then glared at Bruce. “No. Why do you care?”

“I need him for a time sensitive project.”

Tim gagged. Bruce did *not.* Meeting with the head of R&D for a meet-and-greet was evil and unfair. Who cared that Bruce was trying to segue a department transfer for Tim, or that the research down there was potentially interesting? Tim wanted freedom. Nay, he demanded it. No more socializing!

“He hasn’t passed through,” Tam said blandly. “Maybe you missed him because he’s so short.”

Bruce sighed. “Miss Fox, please take this seriously. I know you two are close, but—”

“But what?” Tam said, slapping her papers onto the table. “I’m not his babysitter. I don’t know what he gets up to without me. Maybe you should keep better track of your weird little assistant. Ever think about that?”

Tim peeked up at her fondly. Tam sounded so irritated, as she should be. Her natural state was annoyance, and he thrived on it.

“Tamara,” Bruce said impatiently. “I know you know where he is. He *just* ran past. Please tell me, or—”

“Or what? You’ll fire me?” Tam stood, hands splayed across the desk. “Have fun letting me go without Dad firing your nepo baby too. You know he’s been looking for a reason. I don’t even *want* to be here. So go ahead, Brucie. Make. My. Day.”

There was a moment of silence as Tam stared down Bruce Wayne like a bull about to charge a china shop. Eventually, Tim heard the rustle of fabric as Bruce crossed his arms.

“Alright, no need to get angry,” Bruce said. “Just *please* tell me if Tim stopped by. He’s been skipping his internship too often. We need to talk about it. I was planning to introduce him to R&D.”

“Fine. Whatever,” Tam said as she sat back down.

She got her papers back out and ignored Bruce until he left. Tim waited until he was sure Bruce was gone before crawling out from under the desk.

“Thanks Tam, you’re a lifesaver,” he said, shaking his bangs out of his eyes.

“You owe me,” she said, circling an incorrect sum on the graph. *“Big time.”*

“Gotcha.” Tim added this to the long list of favors he owed her. Tam had been covering for him all summer, and Tim was so far in debt it’d take years to pay her back.

“What’re you doing this time?” Tam asked as Tim straightened his clothes. He’d torn a seam on his suit from running so fast.

“Ditching,” Tim said. “B thinks he’s a bad bitch, but he can’t stop me. My friends and I are going to have a party.”

That’d teach Bruce. The next time he’d try to make Tim talk to a new person, he’d remember this day. What was the point in hoarding a bunch of people if Tim still had to talk to others? That was what delegation was for. Bruce should’ve hired Dick for this position. Although, that’d probably burn out the acrobat even more.

Hmm. Tim would have to look into burning down a few precincts so his bendy human would have a day off. Dick had been working too many hours this summer.

“Have fun,” Tam said, glaring at her papers. “I’ll just be here suffering, as usual.”

Tim patted her head. “At least you’ll make everybody else suffer with you.”

She had lots of enrichment, even if the job itself was trash.

“That’s my silver lining,” Tam said. “Now get out. I’m busy plotting vengeance against my father.”

Tim saluted her, then snuck out of WE. He had a ten-minute lead on Bruce, which gave him enough time to get to the zetas and hightail it out of this dump. Young Justice was calling, and Tim would answer their call.

***

Tim owed Tam his soul. She was a master in the art of distraction. What a wise and actively hostile person. He needed more of those in his life.

Sadly, Young Justice was neither wise or hostile. Heck, they were barely self-aware. Tim liked silly humans, but they weren’t well-equipped to survive in the real world. They were lucky he was there to keep them safe from themselves.

But silly or not, it’d been worth the wait to find humans (and non-humans) to befriend. Normal people were as exciting to interact with as dead sloths, but *these* weirdos? They were better than fish smoothies. Tim was having the time of his *life.*

The ides of summer vacation finally made sense. Ever since Dance Camp, Tim had been running across international borders with them, insulting politicians, raiding military bases, and beating up

eccentric villains for kicks and giggles. *This* was what all those peppy teen shows were talking about. Bonding with his peers had never felt so good.

Granted, it wasn't perfect: Anita's dad was a CIA adjacent menace bent on thwarting Young Justice's schemes, Greta's ghost powers were parried with increasing dark side effects as the screams of the dead called to her to ferry them to new realms of existence, Kon was Kon, and Bart's spaceship needed repairs after being hit by a stray baseball on the planet Myrg after they saved it (and Earth) from conquest with some good old-fashioned cheating the other week—but aside from that, things were swell.

The only other fly in the ointment was that the team didn't question Tim's weird habits anymore. They assumed that everybody from Gotham was like him, and that Nightwing and Batman were just "being polite" when they left the city. It was nice from an open-minded, accepting perspective, but Tim was miffed.

"I feel you, bro," Cassie said when Tim mentioned not fitting in his skin for the third time that afternoon. "I'm having a growth spurt and it's the *worst.* Puberty sucks."

The entire team (minus Kon) was lounging on the beat-up couches in Mount Justice since they were between missions. Bart was next to Tim, filling out a book of Sudoku so fast the pages started to smoke from the friction of his pen, and everyone else was slumped lazily against the furniture.

"Yeah," Tim said as she punched his shoulder. "That's what I was talking about."

Not his crawly, reptilian DNA, or the weird clash of two different kinds of instincts making his brain a contradictory mess. He wished all he had to worry about was human puberty.

Slobo stared at Cassie with dead eyes as he flipped to the next the page of his Teen Muscle Motors magazine. "Y'all are idiots."

"Yeah, sometimes, I think you guys sold all your braincells to One Direction," Tim agreed. "None of you have any critical thinking skills."

Granted, their obliviousness was one of the reasons he liked them, but still, they didn't even blink when he ate raw meat! Or made eerie clinking noises over the comms. Or hissed. What a buzzkill.

This was truly the dark side of friendship.

“Sticks and stones,” Anita said as she ate chips and guacamole. “You’re not the brightest crayon in the box either.”

“Crayon?” Slobo replied, bewildered. “Y’all’re still using crayons?”

Tim tuned out the banter and sulked. His camouflage abilities were too high. He needed to find ways to keep this charade entertaining, otherwise there would be no point in hiding his true nature. Why was entertainment so hard to find?

His inner monologue about humanity’s terrible observation skills abruptly cut off as Bart—who had been suspiciously quiet until now—perked up and said something truly terrifying.

Tim stared at his bestie in horror. “You want to *what? ”*

Bart looked up from the smoldering remains of his Sudoku book and smiled innocently. “I want to be a barber. It looks so cool. Call me Bart-scissor-hands, like the guy in that ancient movie.”

Tim felt the hair on his arms raise. There was a general understanding to keep Bart away from sharp objects. It was the only rule Tim actively helped enforce.

“I want a haircut,” Greta said, floating closer. “Do you think we can find a phantom blade to cut ghost hair?”

“Hmm, maybe?” Bart said as he stroked his chin. “But I need to practice with regular scissors first. Rob, can I give you a trim?”

Oh *no.*

Tim straddled his speedster and cupped Bart’s face in his hands. He channeled all his emotional capacity into giving his speedster a serious but heartfelt gaze. “Bart, I love you. You’re a crucial

part of my world. I'd kill for you, live for you, dedicate the rest of my existence to your happiness —"

"Woah," Cissie muttered.

"—But there's no way I'm letting you near my hair with scissors." Tim finished.

"Aw, come on!" Bart pouted. "I bet I'd be a really good barber. And fast!"

Tim shook his head.

"Pleeeease?"

"Nope. This is a line we must draw in our sand." Tim said.

The only people allowed to give him haircuts were Jack, Alfred, and a babushka in Crime Alley that had been doing Tim's hair since he was six and messed up his own bowl cut. Nobody else was allowed near his head on pain of death.

"I thought we had something real, compadre," Bart sighed. "I'll remember this."

"Sure you will." Tim said, then glanced to the door. "Hey Kon, what's up?"

Kon, windswept and singed, gave a salute before he flopped onto the couch next to Tim and Bart. He must've just arrived from Metropolis, Hawaii, or wherever it was he did hero work these days, because usually Superboy was way better groomed. He hated looking messy.

Or maybe he was still in his post-breakup era? Based on Tim's observations of Dick, those lasted a while.

“I hate Superman’s villains,” Kon groaned. “Why do they all have to be aliens or super geniuses? Why can’t I find a giant gorilla, or a crazy polka-dot man? It’s not fair.”

“Why did you fight this time?” Greta asked, floating directly over Kon’s head.

“Toyman. Toyboy’s dad,” Kon said. “Zero out of ten, do not recommend. That whole family is nuts.”

Tim could believe it. Imagine making a family legacy revolving around dressing up in wacky outfits and using weird gadgets. People needed better hobbies.

“You’ve been running yourself ragged,” Cissie said to Kon. “You should take a break.”

“Eh,” Kon shrugged. “Not much to do. Usually, I’d be hanging with Black Bat, but she’s busy with her dance recitals, so now I’ve got lots of free time. Maybe I should take up knitting?”

Tim perked up. Alfred wouldn’t let him near the knitting needles after the last incident (he’d tried to eat acrylic yarn), but maybe Kon would? This is why he liked having friends. They came with benefits, like access to forbidden craft supplies.

“Didn’t you and BB break up?” Anita said, tugging Cissie over to braid her hair. “Why are you still hanging out?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, that happened,” Kon said. “We weren’t that serious, so it wasn’t a big deal. Actually, I like being her minion better. It’s way less stressful than dating.”

Tim leaned over and gave Kon a high five. He deserved a reward for discovering the awful truth about romance. Maybe he’d finally stop flirting with civilians on missions. A dragon could dream.

“Hey, Superboy,” Bart said, peaking over the edge of the couch, “do you need kryptonite to cut your hair, or will any pair of scissors work?”

“Oh, anything will d—” Kon’s eyes landed on the safety-scissors in Bart’s hand. “I mean, Kryptonite. I need to use so much kryptonite. It’s a huge hassle, but that’s just how it is. Hey, are we going to do a mission, or just hang out all day? I’m raring to go.”

He got up and speedwalked to the supercomputer. Bart pouted on the sidelines, cheated out of another victim.

“Don’t worry Bart, I’m sure you’ll find someone to test your skills on,” Cissie said. “Just not any of us.”

Bart sighed as he opened and closed the scissors. Each snip made the team flinch. “It’s okay, Arrowette. I can ask my buddies Carol or Preston. And if they don’t want to, there’s always Max. He can’t say no if he’s asleep.”

Tim subtly sat further away. He was going to have nightmares about waking up with Hannah Montana bangs from now on.

“Hey, look alive!” Kon said, banging the computer console. “We’ve got a ping.”

Everyone gathered around the computer, happy to move the subject away from haircare. The screen turned on, showing an image that had all of them tilting their heads.

“Are those . . . The rodeo people?” Anita asked.

Tim tapped a few keys, zooming in on the security footage that’d been tagged. It was a National Park Ranger arguing with a semi truck driver on the side of a highway in Idaho. Said truck driver had the familiar, grizzled look of the goons Young Justice had got into a shootout with at the rodeo in Texas.

A highway patrolman stood off to the side, visibly uncomfortable as he watched the shouting match escalate. The footage was being streamed from his dashcam. Rewinding a few minutes showed that there had been three other semis, but they’d gotten away when the one on the side of the road had blocked the highway.

The highway patrolman would be stuck processing the stranded vehicle (and stopping the angry park ranger from strangling the driver), but if Tim and the others hurried they could totally catch up to the other trucks.

“Why are they in Potato Land?” Bart said, poking the screen. His scissors lay abandoned on the coffee table.

“No clue, but it’s the first time we’ve got a lead on them since the rodeo,” Cassie said. “This is our chance.”

“Hell yeah,” Slobo said, smashing his knuckles together. “Rematch, baby.”

Tim bounced on his heels. Revenge was an idea he fully supported. He hadn’t broken nearly enough of their equipment last time, and they needed to pay for almost killing Steph . . . And Slobo too, he supposed. But mostly Steph.

“This isn’t a grudge match,” Cassie said. “It’s a serious mission dedicated to stopping a network of criminal teleporters getting set up around the world. That being said, I’m going to enjoy punching these assholes.”

The team cheered, put their hands together in a circle, and headed for the zeta tubes.

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Three hours, several explosions, and a few crashed cars later, and the mission was a bust.

Tim and his team stood awkwardly in the wreckage of two semis that’d driven into the highway median and crashed into an irrigation ditch. The drivers were sitting on the curb, blinking blearily as they got checked by paramedics for concussions. So much for a rematch, they’d barely gotten a confrontation.

“I really thought we had them,” Anita said, adjusting her Empress mask. “We were so close.”

“I know,” Greta said. “It’s not fair.”

“We can’t even interrogate the drivers,” Cissie grumbled, arms crossed. She looked cold, which made sense since her costume showed a lot of skin. It wasn’t very protective.

“Not our fault the crooks hired a random shipping company to transport them,” Tim said. “They’re getting smarter.”

The only *actual* goon had been the one they’d seen on the computer, but he’d gotten into a fist fight with the park ranger, and was now unconscious in a State hospital. Interrogating him was impossible until he woke up.

As for the other drivers, they thought they’d been transporting farm equipment, not high-grade illegal weaponry. Tim suspected the portal guns themselves couldn’t be teleported, which was why the crooks had to keep shipping them cross-country.

“This is fragging stupid,” Slobo hissed, picking shrapnel out of his jaw. He’d thrown himself in front of the cars, which caused them to crash. “It’s taking too long to kill these guys. I want an actual rematch.”

“Same,” Tim said, poking a broken portal gun with his toe. “But we’ll get them eventually.”

He’d put the goons he recognized into his facial recognition software and put the program on priority. It’d only be a matter of time before they got flagged again, and Tim was already forming a new plan on how to take the fight to them.

“One of these days they’ll slip up,” Tim continued. “And when they do, we’ll be ready.”

This was one reunion Tim had zero plans to miss. Karma usually came in spades, but Tim was bringing a shovel. Getting even was his favorite hobby, and these crooks had let a lot of interest compound. Whoever these people were, they’d regret crossing him.

Chapter End Notes

Deep in Crime Alley is a grizzled babushka who makes bank cutting a temperamental dragon's hair every month. Tim is still bitter that Jack forbade him from biting her when she cut his bangs wrong once. (Cellmates fans know her.)

ANNOUNCEMENT!

If you've been following this story, you'll notice I have mini-stories in the end notes. Harley and Ivy's has been a lot of fun, but I'm at a crossroads for ending it. **Please vote in the comments** if you'd like Harley to break Ivy out, or for Ivy to complete her stay at Arkham and be declared legally sane again. **This will impact both her and Harley from here out.** If you want Ivy as a redeemed villain who's doing more ethical environmental work (partnering with WE, for example), it'd be better if she stayed at Arkham. But if you want to see Harley in her clown costumery, I'll have her bust her out.

I'm happy with either one, so let me know in the comments! ^-^

One Man's Trash

Chapter Summary

Jason's meltdown is interrupted by another meltdown. Luckily, this gives him and Tim the perfect opportunity to practice their pep-talk skills.

Chapter Notes

Hello, hello!

So, I was writing outside yesterday and A BIRD LANDED ON MY LAPTOP. It stared at me with cute, innocent eyes, then glanced down at the novel I was working on (A Snow White retelling, ironically enough) before flitting away. It was the coolest moment of my life. I transcended reality for a moment. What bliss.

Apologies to people waiting for the next "Extraordinary Spouses" chapter. I've been swamped, so it's taking longer to do final edits. I promise Jack and Janet's ridiculous romance will once again grace your screens soon(ish) though!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason came home to the manor for th e last few days of July . Tim was so happy that he tackled him on the front steps and sent them both careening onto the gravel drive.

“Okay, okay, thanks Tim, I get it, I’ve been gone a while,” Jason wheezed. “Stop crushing my ribs.”

Tim reluctantly go t up and dragged Jason into the manor. It ’d been *weeks* since he'd visited. Tim was suffering withdrawal. Jason ’s crime lord business kept him busy, and Tim was once again contemplating razing half the city to give his zombie more free time.

“Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no,” Jason said, rapping him on the head.

Tim rubbed the spot, both impressed and annoyed . His humans knew him too well. At this rate, he ’d never get to do anything nice for them.

Jason tossed his duffel by the shoe rack before heading into the kitchen. Tim trailed after him like a duckling, rattling off a list of things to do together over the weekend ; cold cases, investigations, nature documentary marathons, stake outs, interrogations, murder—

“Not the last one,” Jason said as he put the final touches on a ham and cheese sandwich. “Bruce would have my hide if I made you a murderer.”

Tim gave him a dry look. They ’d literally killed the Joker together. That ship had long sailed.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m *not* getting lectured again,” Jason said as he chewed. “If you want to kill people, do it on your own time. Preferably after you’re eighteen.”

Tim stuffed his hands in his pockets and followed Jason to the library, sulking like a pro. “You’re barely eighteen. You’ve got no leg to stand on.”

Jason wasn ’t even legally alive, *and* ran a crime empire. Why didn ’t Tim get that kind of freedom? This was a double-standard.

“I’m nineteen, you heathen,” Jason said. “So your entire argument is a moot point.”

When they got to the library Tim sat on a couch and picked at the other half of Jason ’s sandwich, disappointed by the texture. It needed something crunchy—walnuts, maybe?—just to shake things up. Jason strolled past the shelves, sighing at the various covers.

“Are you going to read any of them, or just ogle them like Dick does to Babs?” Tim asked.

Jason sighed again. Tim hated that it sounded lovelorn, even to *his* ears. “You wouldn’t get it, Timbo. You’ve never had to watch one of your treasures get taken from you. This kind of pain can’t be described.”

Tim took another bite of the sandwich. Jason was forgetting his death and the disastrous effect it ’d had on everybody, wasn’t he?

“Is this about that old person book you like?” Tim asked. “The one going on auction?”

Jason leaned against the bookshelf with the dramatics of a Broadway actor. “It’s being sold in three days. I can’t take it, Tim. What if Mary’s masterpiece doesn’t go to a good home?”

Tim suddenly wondered if the reason Jason decided to bunk at the manor over the weekend was to distract himself from the auction, rather than to just spend time with him . The timing was suspicious.

“If you’re that worried, you should buy it,” Tim said for what felt like the thousandth time.

“No. I don’t have the means to treasure it properly,” Jason said. “I’d need somewhere safe to store it—preferably behind museum glass—and my apartment isn’t equipped with that.”

Tim glanced around the luxury library they were in. “Okay. Then, have Bruce buy it.”

This room was practically a Swiss vault. The book would be safer here than practically anywhere.

Jason fixed him with a dry, suspicious glare. “And leave it within arm’s reach of you? I don’t think so.”

Tim straightened and set the sandwich crust on the end table. A drop of mustard fell on the hardback book by the plate. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m great at taking care of books.”

Mostly by burning, dog-earing, and throwing them at things. Sometimes, he even ripped out the spines so he could smell the glue better.

Jason rubbed his temples, but before he could start what was no doubt a pointless argument about the care of printed products, the door burst open. Dick marched inside, threw himself onto the couch next to Tim, and sobbed.

Jason and Tim stared at each other like deer in headlights.

Dick looked terrible. His hair needed to be trimmed, his clothes were wrinkled, and he'd forgotten to take his shoes off. Alfred was going to be mad about that (the rugs stained easily) but Dick's tears were more alarming than the butler's potential ire. The crying had to be dealt with immediately. It gave Tim hives.

"Hey, Big Bird, you okay?" Jason asked, leaning on the arm of the couch.

Dick gave a shaky thumbs up, which Tim didn 't b elieve for a second.

"Uh, do you want me to get you cereal?" Tim said, giving Jason a panicked look. "Cereal counteracts tears, right?"

Jason made a so-so motion. Blast it.

Dick muttered something into the cushions that was too muffled to make out.

"What was that?" Jason asked.

"I'm trash," Dick said, head in his hands. "Worthless, useless trash!"

Tim fell off the couch and hissed. Dick 's eyes were bloodshot, and he was dabbing them with a crumpled tissue. The sight made Tim want to crawl out of his own skin. This was unnatural. Dick wasn't supposed to be sad. What happened, and who did Tim need to kill?

"Hey, don't beat yourself up, Dickie," Jason said, throwing an arm around his brother. "Even trash is capable of great things."

“Yeah,” Tim said, sitting by Dick’s feet at the bottom of the couch. “It’s called a garbage can, not a garbage can’t.”

Dick sniffed and wiped his eyes. “You guys mean it?”

“Hell yeah,” Jason said. “You’re a dumpster fire, but you’re the dumpster fire in charge of the Titans, Tim’s education, and the best psychological torture experiment on father figures in waking memory. You’re killing it, even if you are a hot mess.”

Tim nodded. If it weren’t for forcing him to go to high-school, Tim would rank Dick *so* high on the hoard chart.

“Aw, thanks guys,” Dick said, giving them a watery smile. “You’re the best brothers I could ask for. Come here.”

“No tha—” Tim was dragged into Dick’s octopus arms and squeezed to near death. Jason wheezed next to him, trying and failing to pry Dick’s arm off his neck.

“I’m so glad we’re related,” Dick said.

“I’m not. Get off me!” Jason hissed, going for a nerve strike. Dick squeezed tighter, choking him out.

“I’ve been down in the dumps all day,” Dick said. “But you’re right. I need to focus on what I can do well, not my failures. So what if I might lose my job? I’m sick of filling out forms anyway. Life’s too short to be sad.”

“Your job’s in danger?” Tim said, going limp. Resistance was futile. “What happened?”

“I may have fallen asleep at a stakeout and let the perp get away,” Dick said with a shrug. “Not important. Besides, Gordon’s the one who assigned me three double-shifts in a row, so it’s on him.”

It really was. Tim growled, bones vibrating from the rumb le . He was going to need to have to talk with the commissioner about overworking his people. And by talk, he meant bite. Several bites.

“Aw, thanks Timmy, but big brother’s got it handled,” Dick cooed.

Tim rolled his eyes. Trust Dick to find his growls charming rather than intimidating. Zero survival skills, this one.

“False. You don’t even have your sleep schedule handled,” Jason said.

“Wrong big brother. I was referring to Babs in the Orwellian sense,” Dick said. “But I’ve got my own revenge in the works too.”

Jason elbowed him in the ribs. “Yeah, you keep saying that, but it’s been months and you haven’t made your move. I call bullshit.”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Dick said, finally letting go of them so he could rub his side. “Just because I’ve bided my time doesn’t make me any less devious than Babs. It’s all coming together, and trust me, the pay-off is going to be great.”

Tim flopped onto the couch cushion— free, at last!— and laid there like a slug. He needed 3-5 business days to recover from that hug.

“Whatever you say, Goldie,” Jason said. “Maybe I’d believe you if you actually *told* me what you were up to.”

Dick sent a few texts on his phone and flashed a megawatt smile. “And spoil the surprise? It’s like you don’t even know me. Don’t worry though, it’ll happen sooner than you think.”

Tim and Jason exchanged looks, then changed the subject. If Dick wanted to be cryptic, they ’d left him. The important thing was that he was chipper again. His sad face was a horrible thing to

witness.

“As long as you’re happy,” Tim said carefully. “But I agree with Jason. You’re pushing yourself too hard.”

“Not for much longer,” Dick said, slouching against the cushions. “I told Amy—my Bludhaven boss—that I’m moving permanently to Gotham for the foreseeable future. Juggling both precincts is too much, so I’m simplifying.”

“Good,” Tim said, genuinely pleased.

Even if Dick was focusing on Babs, more time in Gotham meant he would have more time with *Tim* . They could go trainsurfing again, practice acrobatics, and go for dragon rides. It ’d be glorious . . . Until school started in September and Dick’s PTA delusions acted up again, anyway . Tim had a feeling he wasn’t going to enjoy that.

But this was for the best. Bludhaven was too far away. Tim got nervous thinking about Dick being out of arm ’s reach. What if something happened? The city could be gassed, or burned, or nuked, and he wouldn’t get there in time to stop it. Relocating his human to Gotham was just common sense.

“Who’s looking after Blud if you’re leaving?” Jason asked, pulling an Agatha Christie book off a shelf.

“The Titans are taking shifts until someone volunteers to go full-time,” Dick said. “Since it’s a dump, that’ll never happen, so they’re betting their shifts on Poker night at the tower. Loser has to patrol the city.”

Tim and Jason snorted. Losers. Bludhaven sucked. It was like Gotham, but without any of the good parts. Still, Tim would rather live there than somewhere like Metropolis. Poor, deluded masses thinking that was a *good* city. Kon complained about it enough that Tim knew it was just as bad (if not worse) than everything he’d heard growing up. Sunshine and non-toxic public gardens? Sounded fake.

“Congrats on finally being able to sleep again,” Jason said, tipping an imaginary hat to Dick. “How does it feel?”

“Wonderful,” Dick sighed. “I’ve just got to move my stuff out of my old apartment, then it’ll be over.”

“Need help with that?” Jason said. “I’m here for a few days. It’d give me something to do.”

“Maybe,” Dick said, hand drifting to ruffle Tim’s hair, as the Waynes were all wont to do. “But that depends. I might wait until next week to end my lease, just to make things easier for myself. I try not to spread myself too thin for galas these days.”

The relaxing, sleepy feeling Tim got whenever someone scritched his head instantly faded.

“For what?” Tim said, cracking an eye open. Jason looking similarly confused.

“Galas,” Dick said, looking between them. His eyebrows crept up to his hairline. “You didn’t know? There’s a big one this weekend. I figured that’s why you came home. Bruce didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Jason said. “That son of a bitch didn’t say a damn word. Fucking hell, I should have stayed in the alley. *Please* tell me we’re not hosting.”

“We’re not,” Dick said. “But if you want to come, we can forge an identi—”

Jason threw *Murder on the Orient Express* at Dick and stalked out of the room. He grabbed a copy of Karl Marx on his way out, and said something unflattering about the Gotham elite before leaving to ghost Tim and Dick harder than he had when he was actually dead.

Tim, meanwhile, needed to fact-check this alarming turn of events. He opened his phone calendar and scrolled. There wasn ’t a single gala on the events list. He opened his mouth to complain to Dick, then paused.

He tapped a few buttons and swapped the vigilante calendar for the family one. Scheduled patrols and stake outs swapped places for dentist appointments and social events. Highlighted in bright blue for the first of August was the Annual High Summer Gala, taking place this Saturday . Their spots had been RSVPed by Alfred, and from the looks of things it was too late to cancel.

“Hey Dick,” Tim said, with foreboding, “I think you should mention the gala to Bruce. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know about it either.”

“What?” Dick said.

Tim shoved the phone in his face. For some unknown reason (probably to avoid overloading the app), the vigilante and civilian calendars weren ’t connected. That usually didn’t affect anything, but this looked like a rare exception.

Dick immediately started snickering. “Holy lack of communication, Batman. I bet Alfred forgot to tell him. That’s a riot.”

Ten to one odds that Bruce was expecting a quiet evening at home this Saturday. Instead, he ’d be talking to Vicki Vale and a thousand hoitey-toitey blue bloods all night. It would be torture, but Tim contented himself with knowing he and Bruce could suffer together. It’d be a good bonding experience.

Although . . .

“Hey, Dick,” Tim said, “if this gala is that important, do you think my parents will be there?”

The smile melted off Dick ’s face. He looked from Tim to the calendar, and seemed to come to the same conclusion as him. Jack and Janet were fairly important, and this was the first time in years that they were in town during gala seaso n . It was almost a given they’d show up. And if Tim was *also* there—

“Shit,” Dick said.

“Yeah,” Tim said. That about summed it up.

Chapter End Notes

After careful calculation and much squinting at the screen, THE VOTES HAVE BEEN TALLIED!

Should she stay? ➡️ 53 votes
Should she go? ➡️ 8 votes

Mental health wins~! 🥳🥂🍾🎆

In honor of that . . .

Security Guard: Hey, um, you know Dr. Quinzel?
Secretary: Yeah.
Security Guard: She's been sneaking into my office to mess with the security feeds all week. I don't want to get ANOTHER director so soon, so can you stop her from doing whatever illegal thing she's doing?
Secretary: I'm here to answer the phone, not put down possible security breaches. That's YOUR job.
Security Guard: Yeah, but I don't think she'll listen to me.
Secretary: Why would I be any different?
Security Guard: Because you're dating the girl of your dreams, and I've been divorced twice. Please show her how to be romantic without resorting to violence, please.
Security guard: *sigh* you're useless. Fine.

One phone call later:

Butch OSHA lesbian: Okay, I came, now what?
Secretary: Help me tie up one of the therapists in her office and make her watch rom-coms until she stops trying to break one of her patients out as a form of flirting.
Butch OSHA lesbian: ...I keep telling you, you need a better job.
Secretary: This place gives me dental! I'm NOT moving on. Now grab that rope, it's time to try our own hand at therapy.

Operation Final Girl

Chapter Summary

At some point, Gotham will have to learn to stop inviting the Waynes (and Drakes) places. But not today!

Chapter Notes

If anyone's curious, THIS is Dick's playboy persona, but only when he's around Gordon. He's having a great time pretending to be like. . . well . . . *this* for the bit, but he and Babs have a great (pretend) relationship.

Many thanks to Ravengranger for the beta! It's always a treat to get your comments! XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every August, Gotham held an Acclaimed, ultra-special, mega-elite Gala to end all Galas. Despite rogue attacks, the ludicrous entry fees, and the lack of good parking, it was the crown jewel of the season. Every rich, upper-crust human on the Eastern Seaboard fought for tickets, going as far as to blackmail, threaten, and go into debt for the chance to walk the red carpet with the rest of Gotham's elites.

The Waynes had standing invitations. Tim wished they didn't. So did Bruce, probably. He'd fought long and hard to play hooky, but Alfred could not be swayed. This was probably the butler's revenge for some imagined slight, though what on earth Bruce or Tim had ever done to him was up for debate. It was more likely that Alfred was just a sadist in disguise.

Tim traced his finger over one of the tablecloths, enjoying how the linen felt against his skin. This year, the city had reserved an Art Nouveau ballroom with an indoor garden for the venue. Gold trim and pearl inlay decorated the walls in sinuous lines. Above them, a glass ceiling illuminated by a dozen candlelit chandeliers made it seem as if the guests were under the night sky. The chatter of several hundred people buzzed around him. If he concentrated, he could pinpoint conversations about investing, company politics, and the latest gossip among the 1%. It was a shame none of it was interesting.

"Bruce, next year can we reserve a private box over the rest of the gala so I can sit regally in my chair and watch the masses?" Tim asked, bored out of his mind.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “Like the Phantom of the Opera?”

“The who?” Tim shook his head. “Sure, whatever. Just give me lurking rights.”

He liked people watching, but people kept trying to *talk* to him. It ruined the vibe.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Bruce said. “I’m sure the organizers would like a way to raise ticket prices with luxury boxes, but this year you’ll have to lurk in the corners of the room like the rest of us.”

Tim huffed, careful not to accidentally blow smoke. Normally, that wasn’t a challenge, but his venom kept igniting in his throat. The other day, he’d accidentally caught his bedroom curtains on fire by sneezing too hard. Alfred had made him install the new ones himself, because he was evil.

“I wish Cass came with us,” Tim said, scanning the room.

“Me too, but she’s in a better place,” Bruce said, looking longingly at the exit.

Cass’s latest dance retreat was in California. She was staying with the Titans during her downtime and enjoying the beach. Jason had also begged off, using his legally dead status and an arsenal of dramatics to stay home and cry over the Mary Shelley book that’d been bought at auction yesterday. Traitor.

Dick and Bruce were the Waynes’ public figures, so they bit the bullet and came. Both of them wore matching gray suits exported from Italy. Dick had “improved” his by adding a lime green tie and pocket-handkerchief, along with enamel frog cuff links.

Dick had also invited Babs, who was so beautiful in her matching green dress that a reporter had already called her Queen Titania. Tim could see her and Dick flirting by one of the fountains. Babs was rubbing circles on the back of Dick’s hand while she talked to a tech entrepreneur, who (Tim tuned briefly into their conversation) was trying to hire her for his startup in Vancouver.

Tim listened long enough to make sure Babs said no, then turned back to Bruce. “I’m going to do my rounds. Call me if you need someone to mysteriously disappear.”

“Alright, just stay away from your mother,” Bruce said.

Tim rolled his eyes and sauntered off to prowl the perimeter of the room. People let him pass on instinct, rubbing their arms and looking unnerved. Tim was glad he still gave off an aura of danger. His hoard was so used to him he’d been worried he’d lost his touch.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Janet. She and Jack stood side-by-side, arms linked, as they talked to a little old man with Einstein hair. He had a walker and looked older than the USA. Tim vaguely remembered him being one of Jack’s old friends. He tuned into the conversation; they were talking about a bunch of other people Tim didn’t care about, and all the fun digs and places they’d ended up in during their careers (most of which Jack had funded). Apparently, Old German Guy’s grandson was a professional in the robotics field and had won awards for his designs. Now, Jack was loudly bragging about Tim, who was also a “gifted prodigy,” and would probably love to email said grandson for nerd-talk.

Please, as if. Tim was an exclusive, hoard-only person. He didn’t mingle with the extras of the world. If they weren’t his, they didn’t matter, simple as that.

Ugh, this was *boring.* Tim was glad he never had to deal with Jack’s buddies. He didn’t know how his mom could stand all the chit-chat. Actually, he didn’t know how she could stand a lot of things.

Tim’s hand spasmed as he resisted the urge to throw himself across the room and tear Janet’s throat out. His instincts had been smoldering like hot coals since entering the ballroom. He loved having his parents back in Gotham, but he and Janet could barely spend time in the same room without going for the kill. Having both of them at the gala was a headache.

This was all the media’s fault. Tim and Janet would’ve stayed home, except people were making a big deal about the Drakes all being in the same city for the first time in nearly two years. Apparently, people were getting confused about why Tim was still living with the Waynes when his family was right there. There’d been enough articles and gossip that it’d be weird if Tim *didn’t* attend this event with his parents.

Janet and Tim couldn’t care less what humanity thought, but Jack was sensitive about family stuff. *Super* sensitive. It’d break his heart if people started accusing him of being a bad dad, so Janet and

Tim had agreed to put the rumors to bed by attending the gala. The TV humans would get their curiosity sated (nobody could complain if he and Janet were seen in the same room together) and Jack would have his peace of mind. It was a win-win, just not for Tim or Janet.

Mother and son made eye contact from across the room. Both grimaced, lips curled to show off sharp teeth. They *could* behave in public, but they didn't like to. When they did, their humans always acted like it was the precursor to a beautiful, non-homicidal relationship, and those were dangerous ideas that led to *camping.* Far better to maul at will, and remind the homo-sapiens who was really in charge.

It'd be so easy to strike, but outing himself would also have consequences (lectures, tears, mass-brainwashing of the masses, etc.,) and they weren't worth it. So, self-control it was. Tim swallowed a hiss that'd been building in his throat, and Janet turned back to Jack, working her jaw, evidently feeling the same. Tim longed to give into his instincts, but quickly shook himself so he wouldn't throw one of his hidden batarangs at her.

There would be time to wrestle with his mom after the gala. For now, he'd have to distract himself.

Tim speedwalked over to a group of middle-aged white politicians and asked them their thoughts on Wade vs. Roe. Five minutes later, a democrat and a republican were calling each other idiots in polite-fancy-talk and a small crowd had gathered. Tim suspected there'd be blood drawn soon.

Operation: successful. Time to find new victims.

Tim got three more groups to start arguing about various topics (green energy, immigration, public transit) before he got bored again. He grabbed a glass of sparkling cider from the side bar, then quickly put it down. His acid was acting up from being so close to another dragon. If he tried to drink, his venom would melt the glass.

The boredom hooked its claws deeper into him. Tim's eye twitched as he rethought his peaceful, obedient ways. Nondestructive harassment didn't have the same flair. How much damage he could do without getting grounded? It was Gotham, they could handle some rough-housing. . . surely people wouldn't care if he and Janet fought on camera *a little.*

Tim's musings were interrupted by Jim Gordon wandering over to him. Annoying, but talking with him guaranteed entertainment, even if it came with irritating comments about child soldiers. Tim had never been so glad to see a cop before in his life.

“I was wondering where you’d run off to,” Gordon said to Tim, helping himself to a plate of hors d'oeuvres. “You’re normally glued to Brucie’s side.”

“Yeah, well, B’s flirting with Vicki Vale again, so I thought I’d save myself from the misery,” Tim said, repressing a shudder.

Bruce said he wasn’t on the market, but that didn’t stop him from being an even worse flirt than Dick in public.

“Vale?” Gordon crunched a cracker. “Strange, I thought he was talking with Miss Kyle.”

Tim looked up from where he was mixing the vegetable dips together. “Selina’s back?”

“As of last night,” Gordon said. “Her world tour is finally over.”

Selina’s “world tour” had been a cover for her mad dash across the globe to steal a collection of cat-themed Egyptian relics. It’d taken her years to do it. Tim hadn’t seen her since he’d first started as Robin.

“I’ll have to tell her hi,” Tim said. “And that I took care of her cats.”

Her strays, at least. They’d been pretty hard to catch, but totally worth it.

“Are you on duty?” Tim asked Gordon. “Please tell me a rogue is going to attack so I can have some fun. This suit is too tight, and I’m bored.”

He needed to gnaw on somebody or he’d go insane. Janet was *right there,* and he couldn’t even nibble on her wings. This was dragon cruelty.

“I’m only here to represent the GCPD,” Gordon said. “As far as we know, the gala is safe.”

Tim sighed. The universe wouldn't let him catch a break.

"Don't look so glum, we want it to be a calm night," Gordon said.

Tim poured vinaigrette into the punch bowl. "Not all of us."

The word "calm" was almost as bad as "emotions" right now.

"You and your thrill-seeking," Gordon said with a sigh, "I know you're tired of hearing it, kid, but I hope you're finding better uses of your time than imitating Brucie. There's more to life than following in his footsteps. A quiet night is the best we can hope for in this town."

Tim grimaced. Another one of these lectures. "I'm doing fine, Gordo. Stop acting like he's tricked me into this. I was already involved with Gotham's night venue before living at the manor."

Way before. Stalking people late at night was one of his oldest hobbies. He'd picked it up from his mom.

"B didn't even want another assistant," Tim continued, grabbing a fistful of Parmesan straight from the bowl. "If he hadn't taken me on, it wouldn't have stopped me from hitting the pavement. Can you cut him some slack?"

Tim was tired of listening to the commissioner get on Bruce's case. It wasn't Gordon's business if Batman trained a sidekick, and Tim could tell it bothered Bruce too, who was damage control for his Robins, not an enabler like people thought.

"I know, kiddo," Gordon said, leaning against the buffet table. "That's getting more obvious to me, what with all you crazy kids running around at night. It used to just be Dick, but now there's half an orphanage out there."

Tim opened his mouth to argue, then paused. Had Gordon just *agreed* with him?

“I just worry about you all,” Gordon said, cleaning his glasses with a rag. “After what happened to Barbara, I can’t help it. That was in our home, but you don’t even have four walls protecting you. No matter how tough you think you are, you’re never truly safe. Batman ought to know that.”

Tim fiddled with his glass, heart aching at the reminder of how Babs had ended up in her wheelchair.

“Then there was Jason,” Gordon said. “God knows it’s a miracle Bruce can still smile after that. It’s because of things like this that I wish Jersey used the death penalty.”

“I’m sure the Joker and karma will have a lovely reunion,” Tim said neutrally.

Technically, he wasn’t lying, since the Joker had already paid for his crimes. Tim just used the wrong tense.

Gordon put his glasses back on. “I’m sure he will. In the meantime, I want you to promise not to throw yourself into anything too dangerous. I don’t think Bruce could bear to lose another son.”

“I’m not—”

Gordon glared at Tim.

“Alright, fine,” Tim said. Human family units would be the death of him. “You done being emotional yet?”

He’d come to the snack bar to escape stuff like this. The gala wasn’t even half over. He knew he should’ve faked being sick.

Gordon ate another cracker. “I’m done, kid. You know, biologically or not, you really take after your guardian.”

“*Excuse me?”*

Tim was spared from thinking about the insult of being compared to a human (favorite or not) by Dick’s arrival.

He draped himself over Tim’s shoulder and giggled airily. “There you are, Timmy. I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Here, hold my phone. I need you to take a video in a couple of minutes.”

He shoved the device into Tim’s hand and took a long dreg of champagne. Tim knew it was watered down, but Dick was really selling the tipsy act.

“Hi, Commish,” Dick said, beaming as he leaned against Tim. “Long time, no see! I got those cases you were asking for done yesterday. They’re in the freezer in your office.”

“Why did you put them in there?” Gordon said. He looked like he had just swallowed a lemon.

Dick blinked owlishly. “I didn’t want the paper to go bad, Commish. Duh.”

Gordon pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can drop the dumb act, Richard. There aren’t any reporters nearby.”

There wasn’t *anybody* nearby. The press tended to stay as far away from Gordon as possible. Tim wanted to learn how he’d trained them to do that.

Dick twirled a piece of his hair. “Act? I don’t know what you’re talking about, Jimmy. I’m incapable of deceit.”

Tim was a bald-faced liar, but that was pushing it, even for him. Dick may have been cheerful, friendly, and emotive, but *honest* was the last word he’d use to describe him.

“You know, Commish,” Dick said, resting his chin on Tim’s head. “Sometimes I feel like you don’t like me very much. Did I do something to offend you?”

Tim rubbed his ear. Gordon was grinding his teeth very loudly.

“You’re dating my daughter,” Gordon said. “That I could forgive, except you seem to enjoy stringing her along with this airheaded-himbo act, and *bragging* about it in the office. She’s over the moon for you, but you couldn’t care less.”

Tim blinked. Dick’s floozy boyfriend charade must have been some act, because even a non-sentient potato could see that Dick cared very, very much about Babs in his own weird (icky, gross, human) way.

“Act?” Dick cocked his head. “You think this is an act? Jimmy, I’d never do that to you.”

Dick had a dangerous twinkle in his eye. What was that German word? Oh yeah, schadenfreude. Dick had *all* the schadenfreude.

“This takes me back to when I was a kid,” Dick said, sipping more champagne. “Remember when I took Babs to prom and you gave me a shovel talk? Told me I wasn’t good enough for her, and if I broke her heart, you’d break my knees? Those were the days. Tell me, does that threat still hold water?”

“Of course it does,” Gordon said warily. “Why?”

Tim looked longingly at where his parents were chatting with a group of businessmen across the room. Talking with Janet didn’t sound so bad compared to being caught in the middle of Dick and Babs’ psychological warfare. Maybe he could signal for his mom to come rescue him? If he cheeped at the right pitch, she might think he was a wounded animal and come to investigate.

Dick smiled like an angel. “I was just thinking about how dull everything is tonight. We could really use something to spice up the tabloids.”

Gordon set down his glass so hard it spilled champagne on the tablecloth. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You’ll see,” Dick said, then pinched Tim’s cheek. “Remember, video.”

He twirled away and vanished back into the crowd, leaving Tim stranded in the corner with a fuming Jim Gordon.

“Do you know what he’s planning?” Gordon demanded.

So much for being an understanding, calm guy.

“No, I’m a conscientious objector to romance,” Tim said, hands full of Dick’s phone, the fistful of Parmesan cheese he’d grabbed, and his glass of cider. “But it probably won’t be that bad. Dick just likes watching you suffer.”

He set down his glass and stuffed the cheese into his mouth. Boom. Problem solved.

Gordon ran a hand over his face. “That’s what I’m worried about. If it was just me he was hurting, it’d be fine. But Babs is my little girl. I can’t bear to see her hurt. You’ll understand when you’re a parent.”

Tim choked on Parmesan. *“When?”*

Parenthood? The image would not compute—not unless he got to abandon his kid in the woods like a proper dragon. Janet was his role model, but raising a hatchling human-style was one thing he *didn’t* want to follow her footsteps in.

“At least there’s one silver lining,” Gordon muttered to himself as Tim cleared his airways. “If he breaks up with her, this farce will finally end.”

Tim wiped his mouth with his sleeve, eyes watering from his near death via cheese inhalation. He glanced over at Dick, then coughed into his fist. “Uh, I don’t think he’s breaking up with her, Gordo.”

Gordon looked where Tim was pointing.

Dick stood near Babs, inserting himself between her and another tech enthusiast trying to recruit her for their business. Several reporters—including the cameraman who’d filmed them at New Years—were loitering nearby.

“What is he—” Gordon began.

Dick looked back at them, *smirked,* and dropped to one knee.

Tim barely had time to put the phone on video before Dick was loudly proposing while holding up a small velvet box.

“Barbara Gordon,” he said, with that diabolical twinkle in his eyes, “The Frosted to my Flakes, my best friend, lucky charm, and real-life Barbie girl, will you make me the happiest man in Gotham and marry me?”

Babs put her hands against her mouth and gasped. The entire gala seemed to register what was happening at the same time, and the hall broke into frantic whispers and cameras clicking.

Babs lunged forward and wrapped Dick in a hug, green dress billowing like a cloud. “Yes! Yes, a thousand times, yes!”

He barely kept hold of the ring—a gaudy, quail egg sized diamond—as she crashed into him, actually falling out of her wheelchair.

Dick caught her in a smooth, elegant movement, smiling like she was his personal sun. A moment later, the ring was on her finger, and reporters surged forward as guests filmed on their phones. Several people were already thrusting their hands out, loudly congratulating the happy couple.

Dick helped Babs back into her wheelchair but didn't let go of her hand. The last thing Tim saw before the crowd turned into a wall was Dick sending a sly wink to Gordon.

Well.

That happened. Talk about gross. Tim hadn't consented to romance in his vicinity, although the cereal puns had been a nice touch.

Tim turned back to Gordon, who seemed to have found a new level of despair he hadn't known about, then had gone a layer below that.

"Too bad about the not-breakup," Tim told him, "I think you're going to see a lot more of Dick from now on." He grabbed the Parmesan bowl and tossed the cheese above his and Gordon's heads. "Mazel tov."

Tim pocketed the phone and left Gordon standing in horrified silence. He suspected the shock would soon give way to anger rather than happiness, since Dick had given that whole speech beforehand.

"Evil, evil human," Tim tutted. "That's just cruel."

Though it was also hilarious. Bruce was already barreling through the crowd, yelling about how he needed to congratulate his daughter-in-law-to-be, himbo-playboy mode megawatt bright, and Gordon was rolling up his sleeves with the efficiency of a boxer. Tim's superior senses could tell that within moments there'd be a clash of the dads that'd make bridezilla moms proud.

Tim whistled low. Steph, Jason, and Cass were going to freak when they found out what had gone down tonight. This would teach them to ditch social events.

Now, since drama was brewing, it was time to make his escape.

Tim wove through the crowds, looking for his parents. After that explosion of romance and feels, he was in the mood for decent company.

Where was Janet? It was time he and his mother spent some quality time together. If they got lucky, they could even get a few bites in before anyone noticed.

Chapter End Notes

Would you believe that Dick's proposal being chapter 69 was a complete coincidence? It's like it was meant to be. Nice.

After the gala, Dick has to field several phone calls from the Titans that are equal parts congratulations on getting married and outraged yelling because aren't THEY his best friends? What happened to bros before hoes? Shock! Outrage! Betrayal! They'll remember this. See if they send him wedding presents now! (This is all in good fun)

Meanwhile, while Dick and Babs were being swarmed by reporters:

Jack: Dick is getting married?! This is so beautiful. I always cry at weddings. And engagements. And movies. And--
Tim: Please stop. Emotions are cringe.
Janet: Indeed. Humanity shouldn't have evolved with tear ducts. It's a waste of water.
Jack: TIMMY! Dr. Pikman, this is my son. Isn't he adorable? He takes so much after his mother.
Dr. Pikman: Yes, but I see similarities to you as well. It is like seeing double of both of you, yet only three people exist. Quite disturbing.

Dr. Pikman is a character the prequel, *Extraordinary Spouses.* He's the only one of Jack's college associates who's officially met Tim, and it's a surreal experience.
Dr. Pikman: I do believe the boy was eyeing his mother with intent to harm. The feeling seemed to be mutual.
Lily: I can't picture Jack's son being anything but sweet . . . but if he's related to Janet too . . .
Dr. Pikman: he is somehow exactly like both of them, but worse.
Greg: Oh God.

Meowments Before Catastrophe

Chapter Summary

Tim's decorating skills may be good, but the materials he uses are the stuff of ethical debates. Good thing he doesn't care about morality.

(Too bad Selina does.)

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for implied/referenced animal death. But, if you've been reading the fic this long, it probably won't shock you. *side-eyes Tim warily* It's a good thing animals are the only things he eats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gotham was buzzing with crime and gossip. Dick and Babs' engagement was the hottest topic in the city. Even the criminal underbelly couldn't shut up about it. Tim had heard more shipping discourse on his stakeouts over the last couple days than he had on social media.

Apparently, the criminal class didn't have any hobbies, because *all* they could talk about was Dick's smitten cinnamon roll act. It'd gotten to the point that gang leaders were enforcing a no phone policy on patrol so people would stop checking their feed for more gossip. Not that it was doing much good; earlier that evening, a couple burglars had practically let Officer Grayson arrest them to ask about his wedding plans, desperate for information on what the theme would be.

Tim was disgusted; crime used to be a dignified profession. Humanity truly was a lost cause.

Dick wasn't helping either. He was all smiles and excitement to the cameras, gushing endlessly about Babs, and milking the publicity for all it was worth. There were several magazines that'd already printed their star-crossed off-and-on dating history. The only time Dick came down from cloud nine was to frown sadly and say his future father-in-law-to-be didn't approve of the match.

Needless to say, nobody was happy with the commissioner. Gordon was getting more gray hair. Tim could relate. He hated drama. It was uncomfortable, and he was never sure where the joke ended. Dick and Babs could keep their monopoly on weird fake relationships. Tim would content himself with his true love (coffee) and engrossing himself with his hobbies.

Hobbies that would be *better* if people would *shut up.*

Below him, several more goons joined the argument about what colors Dick and Babs wedding should be, and Tim twitched. This was supposed to be his escape from the inanities of every-day toil. What was the point in shimmying into skin-tight body armor if he didn't get to dissociate from the horror of teenage adolescence? This was all Dick's fault. Tim was *done.*

"Spoy," Tim whispered into his comm, "cover for me. I'm done for tonight."

"Roger that, my scaly friend," she replied. "I'll take my payment in maple syrup. By the gallon, if you please."

"Whatever makes you happy," Tim said.

He waited until Steph was en-route, then slipped away from his patrol route to practice self-care. He needed to escape from the romance in the air, and he knew exactly where to go to do that. It doubled as reaffirming his claim on Gotham, so it was two birds with one stone.

Well, okay, more like two cats with one claw, but that was basically the same thing.

A hop, skip, and a grapple later, and he was balancing on the edge of the roof by one of his bone shrines. There were nearly twenty of them scattered around Gotham, and Tim was proud how they'd turned out. They'd been up for nearly a year and were now part of the Gotham environment. There were several Reddit conspiracy threads about them, but people adapted to new decor surprisingly quick. Tim only had to break three hidden cameras and one microphone before he could approach it safely.

Everything seemed to be in order, and nobody had messed with his stuff. Most of the rooftops in this part of town were still slashed up with his claw marks too, warning other predators that he had dibs. Excellent! Tim was acing this. All it needed were a few final touches.

He pulled the collars he'd kept from his last meal out of his utility belt and puffed with pride. These would make excellent additions to his territory's aesthetic. It was a shame he wasn't allowed to add Robin merch to the jumble, but the Bats didn't want the shrines connected to his hero identity. There'd been an entire meeting about it, but Tim had tuned most of it out. From what he gathered, it was more of the usual "respecting Jack's desperate pleas not to out Tim as a dragon," and he hardly needed to be refreshed on *that.*

The secrecy was annoying, but Tim was extra careful not to let people know he was responsible for the shrines, if only to placate his humans. Tim was humble enough to be aware that this was extremely considerate behavior, and he deserved much praise for it. Not just *any* dragon would deign to listen to lesser lifeforms. He was spoiling them, but at least he was still allowed to have his bone shrines. That was nice. Plus, he got to decorate them to his heart's content.

"Ninety-eight cat collars on the wall, ninety-eight cat collars," Tim sang, standing on his tip toes so to hang the new collar with the rest. "Swallow one down, pin it around, ninety-nine cat collars on the wall."

There weren't actually ninety-nine. It was closer to twenty, but Tim was trying to make the song adaptation work, even though he was as musical as a goat chewing on tin cans.

His comm crackled as he finished tying the collar on onto the radio antenna he'd commandeered. It sparkled in the glow of nearby street lights, which caused Tim to cheep happily. 10/10, a perfect addition. He should become an interior decorator.

"Robin, report," Batman's voice said, staticky and tired. "And be honest."

Tim considered lying, just because of that. But his shrine looked awesome. He wanted to show it off.

"I'm by myself in the bad part of town," he said, sitting down and kicking his feet through the air. "There are lots of body parts, you should come check it out."

Batman sighed and said he'd be on his way.

When he showed up five minutes later, Tim was bouncing on his heels.

“Check it out B, I’ve almost completed my collection,” he said, pulling his favorite human closer to the menagerie of trinkets he’d hung from the radio antenna. “Isn’t it perfect? You should praise me. I hear positive affirmations are healthy.”

Tim was *very* proud of how it’d turned out. Bones, feathers, and claw marks took center stage, but Tim had been giving his territory markers an extra touch over the summer. Pieces of aluminum, damaged jewelry, and abandoned doodads were strung up like an avante garde crow’s nest. This one also had a couple dozen animal collars from strays Tim had snacked on, giving it a centralized theme.

“I’m only missing one pattern from the pet store,” Tim said, tugging Bruce’s cape. “Pretty cool, right?”

Bruce smiled and patted his head. “Yes, very cool. Good job… They *were* street animals, though? Not pets?”

Tim blinked. “They were on the street, so yeah.”

Most of them had been really gross and mangy. Tim was doing people a favor by targeting the weak ones, even though they were depressing to hunt.

Bruce’s smile started to look more like a grimace. “Robin . . .”

“What?” Tim said, hanging on Batman’s arm.

“I recognize some of these collars.”

Tim paused and put all his weight on Bruce’s arm, hanging like a limpet. “You do?”

“Yes,” Bruce began. “They belong to—”

There was the snap of a whip, followed by a loud, feline hiss.

"*You!"*

Bruce spun. Tim lost his grip and fell butt-first onto the roof. He rubbed his tail bone and looked up.

Catwoman, recently returned from her trip abroad, stood on top of the roof's outbuilding. She glared down at him in all her leather-clad glory, her free hand flexed to show off claw-tipped gloves. She looked apocalyptically angry, to Tim's delight.

"What the hell did you do to my cats?" she demanded, eyes on Robin.

"Shit," Bruce said, and quickly shoved Tim behind him.

***

Selina Kyle was Bruce's on-again-off-again romantic flame, a professional burglar, and one of Gotham's most charming socialites. Tim had only met her in person once because she'd left town shortly after he became Robin. Like, *left* left . Sayonara, adios, goodbye. Bruce had grunted something about a long term job, and left it at that. It was only after hacking into the batcomputer that Tim found out Selina had hyper-fixated on a collection of Egyptian burial vases, and wouldn't rest until she collected them all.

Since she'd been out of sight, he'd put her out of mind. Now, two years later he was getting lectured by her on a Gotham rooftop for stealing her cats' collars. Strange, the passage of time.

Bruce looked increasingly uncomfortable as she ranted, but Tim was in lecture-mode. i.e. tuning everything out. Enhanced senses made selective hearing harder to perfect, but he had lots of practice.

“Calm down, Catwoman,” Bruce said with a deep rumble, a hand on Tim’s shoulder. “He didn’t mean any harm.”

Selina crossed her arms. “Do *not* tell me to calm down. Kleptomania is fine until it interferes with my pets.” She turned to Tim. “Robin, where are my cats?”

Tim pointed at the shrine. The bones jingled in the wind.

It was impressive how fast blood could drain from a person’s face. What little skin Selina showed turned green.

“You *killed them?”* she said, horrified.

Tim scoffed, still riding the high of showing off his shrine to Bruce. “Killed them? They were delicious!”

Batman facepalmed next to him, and Selina grabbed the wall to keep steady.

Tim looked between both humans and wondered what he’d done wrong. Weren’t compliments a good thing? Especially to the chef? Selina’s cats were the best.

“You knew about this?” Catwoman asked Batman.

“I didn’t know they were yours,” Bruce said sheepishly.

Selina’s whip-hand twitched. Tim had a sudden, intense desire to add her weapon to one of his shrines. It’d look so good next to his tin-can mobile.

“I thought the rumors about Robin weren’t true,” she said. “Are you telling me he’s been eating street animals this entire time?”

Bruce muttered something suspiciously like “needs his nutrients,” and shuffled awkwardly.

“No excuses!” Selina said. “This is sick. Bats, you need to make him stop.”

Tim was offended. He’d wanted to eat *people,* but Bruce wouldn ’t let him. Street animals were the compromise. And if some of them weren’t *actually* strays, it wasn’t Tim’s fault. Blame the owners who let them wander Gotham at night. Those were the real villains. Tim was just nature’s consequence.

Tim crossed his arms, ready to make that exact point, when Bruce straightened in surprise, and stared at Selina in horror.

“Stop?” Batman said, against. “Selina, he’s a growing boy!”

Catwoman stared at Batman for a solid minute. “He’s *eating my cats! ”*

Bruce blinked, like he’d just remembered that was bad.

Tim, on the other hand, was touched. Bruce had come so far since the aquarium incident. Was this was support felt like? The Dragon 101 lessons were paying off.

“That’s—” Bruce said, poker face twitching. “I mean, yes, but—”

Selina looked ready to take her cowl off so she could tear out her hair. “But nothing! I leave for two years and you’re suddenly supporting his version of the Penguin’s diet? What is *wrong* with you?”

That was a bad question to ask. Bruce had an itemized list of his flaws in his digital journal. Tim had found it while cyberstalking his favorite human over the summer. It’d take *hours* to get through it.

“You disgust me,” Selina said, shaking her head at both of them.

Bruce made a gut-wrenched sound as Selina darted off and vanished into the night's shadows with a look of loathing. Bruce reached for her with a forlorn gauntlet, but it was too late. She was gone.

A breeze rattled the mobiles on Tim's shrine, like a sound notification signaling that Batman and Catwoman's situationship had been murdered and left for dead.

Tim couldn't care less about that. His entire world had shrunken to only one thing; fierce, disbelieving pride.

He rammed into Bruce and gave him the strongest hug he could muster.

"B, I'm so proud of you!" Tim said, nuzzling Bruce's collarbone. "You supported my diet. I'm so happy."

"No, that wasn't what I—" Bruce began.

Smothering the purr in his chest was pointless, so Tim didn't even try. He was so full of warm fuzzies that he felt like he'd die. Bruce defended him from another human. Bruce said it was okay to eat his food. Bruce *cared.*

"This is the best day of my life," Tim whispered, squeezing harder. Bruce's ribs creaked.

Bruce twitched. Tim cracked his eye open and saw his human's grimace. He was probably 404ing with too many kinds of feelings. Bruce wasn't designed to handle more than one at a time. The reminder made Tim purr louder. He wished more humans were built like this.

Slowly, with great reluctance, Bruce patted Tim on the head, voice strained. "G-Glad to hear it, champ. But, I should go find Selina. I need to explain . . . Something."

Tim tuned him out and burrowed in deeper. This was why Bruce was the best. Favorite status was forever now, no take backs. Nobody could compare.

“You’re the best human, B,” Tim said, a little sniffly. He gave Bruce the biggest, bestest Bambi eyes he could make. “I don’t say it enough, but I love you so much.”

The word stuck to his tongue, but this was hardly the time to be taciturn. Bruce deserved praise and unlimited hoard points for eternity.

Sure, the Waynes were accepting and nice, but since they didn’t want anybody figuring out Robin wasn’t human, they made him follow all sorts of nasty rules. Jack’s paranoia about traffickers had its hooks in them, and neither Tim nor Janet had been able to fix it, even after all these years.

So, Bruce being on Tim’s side right now? It was a big deal.

Bruce made a high-pitched, panicked sound as he stared at where Selina had been. After a moment, he sighed and squeezed Tim back. “Me too, Robin. Never let it be said I don’t give things up for my kids.”

Tim purred louder, the definition of pleased.

***

Back in the Batcave, Dick tapped Tim’s shoulder. “What’s wrong with B?”

Tim looked up from the report he was typing. It was full of sparkle emojis and praises for his human. Bruce got an A+ for good hoard behavior today. Alfred was going to be so proud when Tim told him.

“I dunno,” Tim said. “I think he does this when he’s feeling something.”

He and Dick glanced at where Bruce was laying on the training mats. His headphones were in, but the volume was maxed. The angry, raw lyrics of the Nine Inch Nails were audible from across the

cave. Beside the Dark Knight was a half-eaten carton of ice cream and the sad remains of a bag of pretzels.

“Do I want to know?” Dick said.

Tim shook his head. Anything involving emotions wasn’t worth investigating. Unless they were angry emotions. Those were the best ones.

“Right,” Dick said. “I’ll leave him to it. What do you have going on?”

Tim preened and yanked Dick closer to the screen so he could give him the rundown on tonight’s patrol.

He didn’t know why, but by the end of it, Dick looked a lot more sympathetic to Bruce.

Chapter End Notes

Dick: Sooo, Selina's still not talking to you?
Bruce: .....
Dick: I know the whole "keeping Tim's secret safe" is tough, but couldn't you spill the beans, just this once? I'm sure Jack wouldn't mind if it was in the name of love.
Bruce: It's too late. She's blocked my number. Being born was a mistake.
Dick: *sigh* will helping me and Babs plan our fake wedding make you feel better?
Bruce: .... Maybe.
Dick: Come on, we're having our social media followers vote on which napkin pattern to use.

Meanwhile, in Arkham:
Ivy: I can't wait to get out of here. These group activities are boring.
Killer Croc: I like this. Art time is fun. Look, this is a rat on a unicycle.
Ivy: That's actually pretty cool. Check it out, Nygma, one of us actually has artistic talent.
Riddler: Who cares? Unlike you losers, I'm using my time productively. Behold! A genius plan to trap all of Gotham in a deadly game of riddles once I escape.
Ivy: lame. There aren't even any pictures.
Riddler: Like you can talk. All you've done for the past half hour is write "Pamela Quinzel" in cursive. What are you, thirteen?
Ivy: Sleep with one eye open, Eddie. I know where your cell is.

Killer Croc: Yeah, lay off her, Riddler. She's just sad the doc hasn't visited her in a while.
Riddler: I hate you both. But yeah, she's been gone for a while. Maybe she's on vacation?

Meanwhile, in the depths of Arkham.

Harley: Let me go already! True love calls!
Secretary: Maybe it was a mistake to binge rom-coms. Those all have the underdog do morally dubious things to get the girl. We may be sending the wrong message.
Butch Lesbian: Too late now. Sit back, I'm putting The Proposal in next.

After a While, Crocodile

Chapter Summary

Tim is the most responsible hoard keeper ever, as proven today.

(On an unrelated note, Alfred has great ideas.)

Chapter Notes

@ Raberba girl, thanks for always being an awesome commenter and fun person! This one goes out to you! 🥳🥳🥳

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a beautiful day, and Tim loathed it. There was sunshine, low pollution levels, and not a rogue attack to be seen. Despicable. Tim was suffering, so what wasn't everyone else?

He idly reached for a china display. If he grabbed the right plate, the entire thing would come crashing down. The soothing sound of destruction would do wonders for his mood.

Alfred barely looked over as he grabbed Tim's hand and tugged him away. "I will remind you again, master Tim, that you are not to touch anything in here."

"But Alfie, I'm bored," Tim said.

"No," Alfred said.

Tim clicked his tongue. Another day, another chain around his ankle. Being born wasn't worth this.

He eyed the furniture outlet with distaste. Alfred needed to replace some ottomans that Tim had burned the other day, and had decided to take him along for the ride. Since Alfred's taste in decor would put the French aristocracy to shame, that meant going to fancy, expensive places like this

one; The store was awash in golden light, polished wood, and the scent fresh apolstery. Glass cabinets were full of deliciously delicate trinkets, and a hundred crystal chandeliers were hung above their heads.

Tim's fingers twitched. He bet they'd smash wonderfully.

"I will remind you that anything you damage will come out of your wallet," Alfred said, giving more credit to Tim's theory that he was a secret meta able to read minds. "And I shall make you issue a verbal apology to the store owners."

Tim shoved his hands into his pockets. "Whatever."

Like he cared. Money didn't *mean* anything. It was just ones and zeros on a screen. Its paper form was boring too. Tim only liked coins, and nobody used them in this stupid country.

Alfred patted his shoulder, then found a sales associate to talk about the inventory with. Tim trailed behind them, thinking about everything else he could be doing right now. Alfred was insistent that Tim "pay his dues" whenever he broke something with sentimental value, and it was getting old. Frankly, Tim was surprised there were still things in Wayne Manor that *had* memories attached to them. Tim was thorough with his purges.

After a few invitations to test the furniture (without breaking it), Tim was ready to collapse on one of the designer leather sofas in the corner and scratch it up. Or take a bite out of a chair leg. He wasn't picky.

Tim eyed Alfred warily. Yeah, neither of those would go over well.

"Alfie," Tim said, tugging his sleeve. "Mind if I step out? I need a break."

For some absurd reason, Alfred looked pleased. "Thank you for telling me, master Tim. I will handle the rest. You may wander the other shops. Call me when you wish to go home."

"Cool," Tim said, flummoxed. Why was he getting thanked? He wasn't doing anything special.

Whatever. Permission was permission.

Tim swiped some mints from the bowl on the counter and strolled out of the outlet with a sigh of relief. If he'd spent a second longer going over types of wood finishes, he'd have gone insane.

The Diamond District was lit up like its namesake, the sun reflecting off a thousand storefronts like a disco ball. A steady stream of people in business suits and brand clothing sauntered down the sidewalk on their way to lunch, heads turned toward phone screens. The smell of asphalt made Tim want to gag.

He popped a mint in his mouth and wandered up the street, glancing at the array of overpriced window displays lining the avenue. Furniture, furniture, light fixtures, blah, blah, blah. Hopefully, Alfred would finish soon. Tim wanted to go back to his hoard and give them the extra mints he'd stolen as a treat.

Halfway up the block, Tim stopped, then backpedaled a few feet. He'd spotted something, and now he couldn't take his eyes off it. He stepped closer to the window, putting a hand against the glass in awe. Pure perfection stared back at him, a miracle of existence and a treasure among treasure.

This . . . This was amazing. He wanted it. No, he *needed* it.

Now.

***

Forty minutes later, Alfred found him and cleared his throat. "Might I inquire what you're doing, young master?"

Tim didn't look at him. He was sitting criss-cross on the sidewalk, staring unblinkingly at the window still. "I want."

“I see. And what is it that you want?”

Tim pointed at the display of plushies that mocked him behind its bullet-proof glass. “That.”

He needed better words, but the dictionary itself would weep and admit defeat if faced with the task of condensing Tim’s affection into the sterile limitations of language. There weren’t enough adjectives in the world to convey his emotions, which only reinforced Tim’s pride that *his* species was smart enough to avoid language altogether . . . Aside from a highly complex dialect of graphic insults, but that didn’t count.

Alfred leaned closer to the glass, squinting at the sun’s glare. “Is that a dragon?”

Tim hissed and got to his feet. “No! Don’t insult me, Alfred. It’s not. It’s… Um…”

He wasn’t actually sure what creature the Holy Grail of Plushes was. That hadn’t seemed important.

“I suppose we should find out,” Alfred said. “Come along.”

Tim followed the butler into the toy store so closely that he almost stepped on Alfred’s heels. Inside it smelled like varish and bubblegum. Several kids on child leashes were rooting through a bin of toy cars, and a gaggle of mothers were perusing the board books. Tim only had eyes for the stuffed animal in the windows.

His prize turned out to be a crocodile. It had nubby teeth, fuzzy green scales, and tiny arms perfect for squishing. It was just big enough to hug without being unwieldy, and the snout doubled as a neck pillow.

“Alfie, I want,” Tim said, giving it a squeeze. He was never setting this down. The employees would have to pry it out of his cold, dead hands.

“Nothing is stopping you from purchasing it,” Alfred said.

Tim shook his head, face buried in the fluff. “I forgot my wallet.”

He’d heard “furniture store” and figured he’d disassociate the entire time. He hadn’t imagined he’d find a treasure while he was suffering. Rookie mistake, there was treasure everywhere. Tim was a *fool.*

“Luckily, I have mine,” Alfred said. “Will master Crocky be the only thing you’re purchasing?”

Tim straightened. “You’re getting it for me?”

Free present? Free *hoardable* present? Tim was starting to suspect this was a hallucination.

Alfred smiled. “It’s hardly a large purchase, young sir. I doubt it will impact my small fortune.”

If Tim had his tail, he’d be lashing it back and forth. As it was, his poker face had been shanked by his smile and left to bleed out in an alley.

“Let’s get all of them,” Tim said excitedly, pointing to the plushie wall. Several other crockies were on the shelf, each in a different pose. One had a rain bucket hat. “Please, Alfred. My hoard needs it.”

He’d never recover without these little guys in his life. He’d have to become a rogue to cope.

Alfred sighed good-naturedly. “I suppose there’s no helping it if it’s necessary. Although, I hope you start hoarding furniture in the future. It would put my mind at ease if you valued it in the slightest.”

Tim looked up from where he was squishing his Crocky’s paws together. “Why? It’s boring unless I get to break it.”

He and Alfred grabbed a cart and started filling it with toys. Tim swept an entire shelf clear, then chucked several more stuffed animals onto the growing pile.

“I supposed I’ll have to continue contenting myself with redecorating,” Alfred said dryly.

“That’s what Dad does,” Tim said, thinking about Drake Manor’s many *(many)* renovations.

After they found all the crocodiles, Alfred stopped Tim before they could go to the register.

“I believe you’re forgetting something,” he said.

Tim blinked and looked around. He didn’t see any other Crocky plushies. Was this a trick question?

“It’s only fair the entire family adds to their hoard,” Alfred said. “I suggest you find something for the others, as well.”

Oh.

Oh.

“One second,” Tim said.

He abandoned the cart and began to prowl. Which plushies would his humans like?

***

“What the hell is this?” Steph said.

“I saw it and thought of you,” Tim replied.

She lifted the shoebill and stared at its freakishly huge mouth. “I feel like I should be offended.”

“Why?” Tim said. He rolled across her bed and poked the stuffed animal. It was a life-size one, which meant it was almost as tall as her. “It’s big and fluffy, and the mouth doubles as a purse. You can smuggle *so* much candy into the movies.”

Steph hummed. “True. I could probably fit a two-liter bottle of Zesti in here.”

“See?” Tim said. “I give good presents.”

His entire hoard was benefiting from his generosity. Dick had gotten an elephant, Bruce a Tapir, Jason an octopus (left in one of his safe houses, draped over a collection of Bridgerton novels), Babs a naked mole rat, Cass a monitor lizard she’d immediately named Tim-mini (to Tim’s displeasure), and Alfred a distinguished looking Meerkat that’d been buried under several manatees in the back of the store.

Jack got a present too, since he was the ultimate hoard member. Tim had grabbed a budgy with an explorer hat that could be clipped to a suitcase, and his dad had vowed to carry it with him forever. (Tim had looked smugly at Janet, but she’d been too distracted glaring at the Baby’s First Stuffy toy he’d grabbed her—an insultingly cuddly dragon blob with anime eyes—to catch the expression).

Tim had also gotten stuff for Young Justice. Some of the team had been hard to shop for, but he was proud to have found Bart a kiwi and Kon a flamingo. There was now a separate group chat for everyone on the team to share pictures of their stuffed animal minions doing random stuff. Greta was the one who posted the most, despite needing other people to take the photos of her capybara and operate the phone. She had a telenovela-esque plot and a tragic backstory for the giant rodent. Last Tim had checked, Cappy the Capybara was the long-lost sibling of Kon’s flamingo, who had tried to kill the rodent in a convoluted plot that involved ouji boards, possession, and an alliance with Darkseid. The rest of the team was hooked, and were attempting to get Greta to write it down. It’d make a great comic book.

“You give weird presents,” Steph said, flopping onto the bed next to him. She lifted the giant bird over her head and hummed. “But this thing’s weird, glassy eyes speak to my soul. I think I’m going to leave it around the apartment to freak out Mom.”

Tim glanced at the shoebill's admittedly disturbing face, and nodded. "Told you it was a good fit."

***

The next day, Tim finished handing out the stuffed animal presents. It was a relief to be rid of them. Tim loved hoarding his own things, but balked at keeping unnecessary items in his nest. There was a reason he was prone to destroying furniture and random objects; if he didn't put it in his hoard, it didn't belong and therefore had to die.

So, it was with no small satisfaction when he finally got the last gift out of his house.

"Thanks," Tam said, setting the small plushie on her desk. "Just what I've always wanted."

The Tasmanian devil glared up at her with near sentient hate.

"I'm glad you like it," Tim said, spinning his his office chair. "It matches your aura."

Tam turned the exact same expression on Tim, proving his point.

"What's the occasion?" she asked, leaning back in her seat. She started doodling on notepad. "You trying to bribe me or something?"

"Nah," Tim said, leaning closer. Her gel pens smelled nice. "I was just shopping for my hu—hoa—uh, the Waynes, and stumbled on that. I think it adds flair to your desk."

Tam's poor workspace needed personalization. It was the embodiment of soulless, corporate drudgery.

Tam continued to glare suspiciously at the toy. "Right."

“If you can cover for me soon though, that’d be nice,” Tim said, spinning once more. The blood rushed to his head. “My friends want to hang out on Friday, but Bruce won’t give me the day off.”

He was still set on introducing Tim to the R&D department, but Tim was less than interested. It was summertime. He’d rather hang out with his friends.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Tam said. “But you’ll need to stop relying on me to play hooky. I’m only working here until the end of August.”

Tim paused and let the blood trickle back into his brain. “Oh, yeah. I forgot. That’s pretty soon.”

“I know. I can’t wait,” Tam said, looking exhausted. “Just one more month, then I’m free. It’s going to be amazing to have time to myself again.”

Tim frowned. Losing easy access to Tam didn’t sound amazing at all. She was angry all the time and never smiled. He liked that. Where would he get his daily rage quota is she wasn’t around?

Hmm. Well, he’d deal. She wasn’t hoard, so he’d survive. There was always Jason. He got riled up easily; all Tim had to do was mention the Netflix Persuasion and he went *off*.

“I hope you can do whatever you want forever once you’re free,” Tim said. “We’ll make congratulation sandwiches on your last day. I’ll bring the marshmallows.”

“Thanks, Tim,” she said, shoulders loosening. “I’d like that. Just no sardines.”

“They’re the best part!” Tim said. “Especially once you add artichoke hearts or pepperoncinis. The vinegar gives it a nice pop.”

He smacked his lips to drive the point home.

Tam rolled her eyes. “The only salty things I want on my PB&Js are potato chips. You can keep everything else.”

“Boo,” Tim said. “Shun the nonbeliever. Shun!”

She capped her gel pen and tucked it behind her ear. “Like I’ve *repeatedly* told you, I’ll try whatever nonsense you claim is food, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Now get out of here. If my dad thinks you’re distracting me, he’ll get all judgy.”

Tim hissed and pushed his chair back to his desk. Stupid Lucius. He hoped he choked on his rice crackers at lunch. Focusing on work was the last thing Tim wanted to do when he was on the clock. But alas, needs must. He rested his chin on his elbow and opened up his data entry packet. Something something, numbers and important stuff. Lame.

Tim switched tabs to WE’s five-year plan and made his own copy to annotate. If he was stuck here for the foreseeable future, he might as well do something vaguely interesting. It was a good way to familiarize himself with the company and put Janet’s ruthless business acumen to good use.

“Let me know if you want to cash in any of your favors,” Tim told Tam as he started scrolling. “I don’t want to be in your debt once you’re gone.”

He heard the click of Tam’s keyboard behind him, but didn’t glance up. Her voice carried well, and his ears were sensitive to boot. Which was why he heard her muttering clear as day.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll be square soon.”

The Tasmanian Devil’s bared teeth gleamed from its place on her desk.

Chapter End Notes

Canonically, Tim Drakes LOVES Gotham's weird Barney knockoff, Crocky As a fellow crocodile lover myself, I couldn't resist give him the same fondness here (even though dinosaurs are an affront to his draconic sensibilities, he has a soft spot for gators and crocs.)

All the plushies:
Jack: pocket-sized budgy
Janet: the most insulting dragon toy Tim could find
Bruce: Tapir
Dick: Elephant
Jason: octopus
Steph: Shoebill (look them up. They're so metal)
Babs: naked mole rat
Cass: monitor lizard
Alfred: meerkat
Bart: kiwi
Kon: flamingo (named Sir Mingo)
Greta: capybara
Cassie: cow
Anita: aye aye
Slobo: Dog chew toy
Cissie: a fat pigeon
Red Tornado: a lemur to give his daughter

Dick: I’m offended I got the most normal one . . . But also, friend for Zitka! This is great.

(Meanwhile, Bruce, still recovering from the Cat incident, cannot emotionally handle more affection from Tim. He's experiencing too much parental joy. It's made him useless around the house, and he still hasn't set down the tapir.)

The Tam Fox Redemption

Chapter Summary

Tam: How do you feel about morally-dubious alliances?
Tim: You had me at morally-dubious. Go on.

Chapter Notes

Tam has done nothing wrong in her life ever, and therefore needs no redemption. I just couldn't resist the Shawshank reference. ;)

BTW, a fun fact, Lucius named Tam after Thomas Wayne because he admired the guy so much. Don't mind me having a heart attack in the corner. I just think that's sweet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim loved summer. It was freedom and bliss from all the pesky human conventions at high school. He could sleep in as late as he wanted, hang out with his friends, and maximize hoard time. So far, August was paradise, and he never wanted it to end.

This year, however, there was a fly in the ointment; his internship.

Bruce refused to give Tim more than a couple days off at a time. He *said* it was because Tim was doing an amazing job training new hires, and that if he logged enough hours as a lemming Bruce could transfer him to the R&D department as a higher level intern, but Tim knew that was bull. Bruce was still grieving his woulda coulda shoulda crush on Catwoman, and was using Tim—the only Robin still living at Wayne Manor—as an emotional support child to cope. It was torture.

“I mean it, Dick, Bruce is insufferable,” Tim said. “He makes your post-breakup benders look tame.”

Dick glanced up from his wedding planner. “It's that bad? He and Selina weren't even dating.”

To think the king of obnoxious romance was this naive. Irony didn't pull its punches.

“It's *worse* than bad. He’s been going to WE full-time all week,” Tim said with a shudder. If that wasn’t a plea for help, he didn’t know what was. Bruce usually only went a few hours each day. “He's sulking worse than Jason when he’s out of regency dramas to watch, which you’d *know* if you paid attention to anything outside of your and Babs' wedding.”

Dick circled an ad in the magazine for accessible gazebos. “Hey, it’s not easy juggling two jobs, an engagement, and the Titans. Cut me some slack.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “You did that to yourself. I’m not pitying you.”

“Well,” Dick said, marking another ad, “you’re the reason Bruce and Selina aren’t together, so maybe stop calling the kettle black, pot.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Tim said, affronted. In fact, he was playing damage control. Bruce had a perfectly good stuffed animal to squeeze, why did he have to keep being sad? Wads of hoardable fluff were way better than a relationship.

Dick gave him a side eye.“You ate fourteen of Selina’s cats over the last two years.”

“Stop blaming me for helping the circle of life go round and round,” Tim said. “The cats had it coming.”

If Selina didn’t want him to eat them, she should’ve taken them abroad with her. It was simple math. Tim would *not* be silenced by the morals of humans. If they insisted of adopting random animals as pets, it was their job to protect them from death by dragon.

“It’s not fair, Dick,” Tim said, flopping onto the couch cushions. “Young Justice gets to start international incidents whenever they want, but I’m stuck babysitting a depressed manchild.”

He wasn’t even allowed to dive bomb Drake manor to relieve stress. There was no justice left in this cruel, evil world. He should have stuck with stalking the Waynes and avoided this domestic

nightmare altogether.

Dick patted Tim's head and went back to his wedding plans, telling Tim to stay strong and endure.

Useless. This was why he was only in the top ten.

***

Talking with Jack was equally unhelpful. Tim's dad just said something about the importance of quality time and empathy, which had both him and Janet gagging. These days, nobody understood that emotions were meant to be repressed, not expressed. Tim almost missed when Bruce was a grief-stricken pile of sadness.

Steph and Cass were at least sympathetic to Tim's plight, and encouraged him to prank Bruce as revenge. So far, that was going well, mostly by adding hot sauce and Toxic Waste candy to Bruce's food. The Dumb Knight refused to let Tim play hooky from his internship still though, so overall it was a failure in rebellion.

Tim slumped over his cubicle desk, idly clicking a pen as he stared at his phone. He'd texted Jason a long rant dissing Bruce, but hadn't gotten a reply. Weird. Making fun of his dad was Jason's favorite hobby. Was he doing crime lord stuff already? It wasn't even noon.

Lucius paused by the desk and glared until Tim put his phone away. There was no peace in this hell. He grabbed the nearest stack of papers and started flipping through it, pointedly ignoring Lucius until he left to do CFO-Things.

Several minutes later, someone else turned their wrathful gaze upon him.

"Tim."

Tim looked up from the meeting minutes he was reviewing. Tam stood in front of him, arms crossed and jaw tense. She had a menacing aura, like a final boss in a video game. Tim instantly cheered up.

“Hey Tam, what’s up?” he asked, tossing the minutes aside. They were boring; all the board did was waste time and beg Bruce to get off his phone.

“I need your help,” Tam said, with the air of someone told they had to get a tooth pulled without anesthetic. “I’m cashing in the favors you owe me.”

“All of them?” Tim said, surprised.

“Yes, all of them. This is big,” she said. Tam glanced around, then took a seat next to him and whispered. “Dad wants me to stay here the rest of the year. He’s thinking of moving me to reception so I can build my people skills.”

“Ew, no,” Tim said. “That’s so messed up.”

Tam was extremely unfriendly. It was one of the best things about her. She regarded new faces with suspicion and disinterest. Tim rarely saw her smile, and it was a *crime* for Lucius to try and change that. People skills, *please.* Tam was wonderful exactly how she was.

“Thanks,” Tam said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. It smelled like chemicals. She must have just gotten it restraightened. “I think so too, and enough is enough. I’m busting out of here. Which is where you come in.”

Tim sat straighter as Tam pulled out her phone and showed him her plans.

“You want me to cause a company wide incident?” Tim asked, just to be sure.

Tam nodded. “I need time to get to the airport, and Dad watches me like a hawk. If you can distract him the entire day, that’d be great.”

“Airport?” Tim parroted.

Tam nodded. “I’m going to stay with my aunt until my internship in Star City starts in September. I’ll be eighteen by then, so Dad can’t tell me what to do. I’m sick of him forcing me to do what he wants. His life ambition may be to see me at WE, but I’ve got dreams of my own.”

Tim was impressed. She was taking this running away thing seriously. He was sad she was leaving Gotham though. She was so close to becoming hoard.

“What about school?” Tim asked. “Aren’t you a senior?”

Tam gave him a look. “I’m already graduated. I finished my Associates degree in June. Didn’t Dad or Mr. Wayne tell you I skipped a grade?”

“No,” Tim said. “School is the forbidden topic.”

It always devolved into Tim hissing and scratching furniture, so Bruce had avoided bringing it up over summer break. After Tim had spent forty minutes explaining why he wanted to drop out and live in the woods as an uneducated cryptid, Lucius also stopped.

“Well, I did. Dad enrolled me in some pretentious, dual-degree program when I was fifteen so I could get a head start on college,” Tam said. “It was high-school but extra hard, so I got a two-year degree alongside my high-school diploma.”

Tim stared at his desk in silent horror. *Extra* school? No wonder Tam was always angry. Tim would have gone full rogue.

“I will protect you with my life,” Tim vowed, deciding Tam suffered enough. “When’s your flight?”

***

Creating an incident was not hard. Tim’s specialty lay in inciting gang wars and committing arson, and those skills carried over to the corporate world.

All it took was wandering down to the intern cubicles and telling everyone that Bruce gave everybody a long lunch. Once the interns ran en masse to the elevators, chatting excitedly about good bosses and beating the lunch rush, Tim snuck over to the team lead's computer and wrote an Email to HR saying that all the new hires were going on strike, effective immediately, and that they would only negotiate with Mr. Gaintely, an elderly board member who was currently in Australia and refused to be contacted by anything but faxes.

Once that was done, Tim cracked his neck and printed some altered car schematics. He went to R&D and gave the Head of Research the blueprints.

"Lucius liked them, but Bruce wants you to replace the car battery with something more eco-friendly," Tim told him. "Like, lemons or something."

The guy blinked at him, then slowly explained how that was impossible. Tim shrugged, told him he just worked here, and that Bruce knew a guy in a startup in California who said he knew a guy who'd heard it could happen.

"Mr. Drake," the Head of Research said again. "I can't state this more plainly. It's impossible."

"It's Tim," Tim said languidly, "and Bruce is already pitching this to the board, so you need to make impossible possible by 5:00. If you don't like it you can go talk to Bruce yourself."

After several more minutes of stonewalling the poor guy, Tim "conveniently" remembered an opening in Bruce's schedule, so R&D could have an emergency conference with him at 2:00, right after lunch.

Tim strolled out of R&D and called Tam.

"Phase one is complete," he said. "I'm heading to your dad's office now. Better call a taxi."

"Thanks, Tim," she said. "You're the best."

“Stop, flattery will give you everywhere with me,” Tim said, a skip in his step. “Watch out, or I’ll be tempted to keep you.”

She’d make an excellent addition to the hoard. But Tim wasn’t allowed to get attached now. He had a debt to pay.

“Haha,” she said dryly. “I mean it though, you were the only thing that made this summer bearable. Catch you on the flip side.”

She hung up. Tim took a moment to preen. If only more humans were as blunt as Tam. The world would be a better, more draconic place. Although, maybe it was a good thing there was a shortage of good humans, otherwise Tim’s hoard would be even bigger.

He collected himself, put his phone away, and started phase two. AKA, smashing his head against the nearest door frame hard enough to see stars, and stumbling into Bruce’s office with blood dripping from his temple.

“B, can you help me?” he slurred.

Bruce looked up, went white, and vaulted over his desk. Lucius turned around and dropped the papers he was holding.

“Tim, what happened?” Bruce demanded, Dad Mode in full swing.

“Troll in the dungeon,” Tim said woozily, “thought you ought to know.”

Then he fell dramatically to the ground and pretended to faint.

***

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?” Bruce asked again.

Tim shook his head, which in retrospect was a bad move. “No, I’m good. Or Gucci, as we cool kids say.”

The paramedic hummed and shone a penlight in Tim’s eye again. He hissed in displeasure.

“He should be fine, but keep an eye on him in anything changes,” the lady told Bruce. She was as grim-faced and no-nonsense as Leslie, and had biceps to rival Batman’s. “If possible, limit his screen time so he grows his braincells back.”

“Hey!” Tim pouted. He’d told everybody that he’d been playing Candy Crush on his phone and walked into a doorway. Now everybody was judging him. “It happens.”

“Only to teenage amoebas with no spacial awareness,” the paramedic said. “You’re lucky you didn’t break your nose.”

Tim grumbled that luck had nothing to do with it, but was ignored by everyone in the room. The paramedic repacked her emergency kit and left. Bruce took a large gulp of grape juice, looking like he wished it were wine.

Lucius popped his head into the room and grimaced at the bandage on Tim’s head. “Mr. Wayne, the meeting started ten minutes ago. If the emergency is over, we need you.”

Lucius had been the one to call 9-1-1 while Bruce pressed a towel to Tim’s head, and had been suitably distracted until the paramedics arrived. Tim had been worried Lucius would notice Tam’s absence, but the head injury worked like a charm, and now both he and Bruce had to play catch-up with the board.

“I’ll be there,” Bruce sighed. “Let me call Alfred first. He needs to pick up Tim.”

“No thanks,” Tim said. “I’m good. Moving vehicles don’t sound fun right now.” He wasn’t nauseous, but Bruce didn’t need to know that. “Can I go to the meeting with you?”

Bruce looked surprised. Tim made a mental note to go to more of these things willingly, that way he wouldn't look suspicious at times like these.

"Sure," Bruce said, "but remember, it won't be very exciting."

Tim hummed, glancing at his watch. It was 1:50.

"I dunno," Tim said, "I have a feeling this one will be different."

***

Understatement of a lifetime.

Tim got a front row seat to the entire R&D department breaking into the meeting and lecturing Bruce about clean energy solutions, the interns coming back from lunch and freaking out because they hadn't known they were part of an impromptu worker's strike, and a representative from HR arriving at the worst possible moment to ask if Mr. Gaintly's nephew would count as a representative for the negotiation.

There was a chance it could have ended peacefully, but Tim attended for a reason. While everyone was shouting to be heard, he calmly reached under the table and grabbed a box he'd hidden earlier.

"Go forth, my delicious minions," he whispered, and unlatched it.

Turned out, high class Gothamites were very squeamish. The combination of rats and cockroaches turned the crowded room into a blender of panic.

Tim sat back and filmed the madhouse on his phone. He hoped Tam was having a nice flight, but if not, at least this footage would cheer her up later.

***

Catching the rats took an hour. Calming down the hysteric HR representative (who had a phobia of insects) another forty minutes. The interns were relatively easy to appease by saying they weren't fired for being part of a strike they had no idea even existed, and they were out of the room in less than ten minutes.

Talking to the R&D people took longer, because they weren't just mad, they were nerds. The entire board had to listen to them rant about clean energy sources for an hour before Bruce finally got a word in edgewise, and told them he hadn't asked for the schematics to be changed.

"Who told you this?" Bruce asked them, askance.

"Well," the Head of Research said, "Mr. Drake came down and—"

"Wait, Mr. Drake?" one of the interns said. They'd returned to the meeting with apologies-for-starting-a-riot coffee. "He told us we had a long lunch."

Everyone slowly turned to look at Tim.

He fished the last potato chip out of the snack bag he brought and shrugged. "In my defense, I was unsupervised."

***

Bruce rarely lost his temper. He was even-keeled 95% of the time and responded to conflict with pragmatic problem-solving and lots of grunting. Very, *very* few things made him turn spitting mad.

Tim just found one of them.

"—of all the hare-brained, inappropriate, *reckless* and *irresponsible* things you've done, this is the worst!" he yelled, pacing his office like a demon stuck in a pentagram.

Tim stayed on the couch, icing the head injury he gave himself and staying quiet. Bruce's anger didn't upset him, but he had a headache and wanted the lecture to end quickly.

"My parent's company is not a playground," Bruce continued. "You can get away with this at school, but there are real consequences for doing this here, understand?"

"Yes," Tim said. "But—"

"No buts!"

"Fine." Tim slumped deeper into the couch. "Are you going to fire me?"

Bruce looked very tempted, but he shook his head. "No. You'd see that as a reward."

Tim nodded, glad they were on the same page.

Bruce sighed, suddenly losing his rage. He sank into his chair, head in his hands, looking exhausted.

"This company is important to me, Tim," Bruce said. "I'm very hurt you did this. It's the only way I can help people outside of the mask. I wanted to share that with you."

Bruce was using the "I feel" statements from the therapy books he and Dick always read. He must be *very* upset. Now Tim was starting to feel guilty.

He got up and padded over to Bruce's sofa. "Sorry, Bruce. I should have planned better. You were a civilian casualty. If it helps, I didn't do this for fun."

Bruce grunted, which Tim translated to him wanting to know what the hell that was supposed to mean.

“I mean it. I like WE,” Tim said, leaning his head against his human’s shoulder. “You do interesting things here. There’s just too much paperwork and you don’t let me do anything fun. I just run papers back and forth and get people food. That’s not fulfilling.”

After Jack had talked to Bruce earlier in the summer, Tim had been allowed to sit in on lots of meetings, but they lasted too long and he wasn’t allowed to harass people. Bruce had been trying to ingratiate him with R&D, but Tim wasn’t interested in being another department’s stooge. There weren’t enough challenges for him here.

“I thought you were enjoying some of it,” Bruce said tiredly.

“Well, yeah,” Tim said, thinking fondly of Tam. “But I have the rest of my life to do boring, adult things. Right now, I’d rather just hang out with my friends and have fun.”

Everybody kept telling him to act his age, and Tim was starting to want to. Young Justice was cool, and there were only a few weeks until school started. He had to maximize the chaotic fun times while he could. Besides, now that Tam was gone, 96% of Tim’s entertainment was too. Why stick around when all that was left was corporate drudgery?

“Is that why you did this?” Bruce said. “You’re lashing out because I’m too strict with you?”

“Nope,” Tim said, then continued before Bruce could interject, “Well, I mean, you are, but this is different. I wouldn’t do anything bad to the company just for fun.”

Mostly.

Bruce rubbed his temples, but didn’t push Tim away or keep yelling. He seemed calmer, if not still highly disappointed. “Given your track record, Tim, I’m not inclined to believe that.”

Tim huffed and draped himself more over Bruce. “Come *on* B. The fire alarm incidents helped test our evacuation and safety procedures, I’ve only played hooky when there weren’t important meetings, and nobody even knew Bart was here the one time I let him in.”

Mainly because Bart dashed through the building and pulled every single fire alarm so fast that the human eye couldn't perceive him, but details details.

"What about today, Tim?" Bruce asked, lips pursed.

"Everything got resolved and nobody was hurt," Tim said.

"A woman had a panic attack."

Tim blew his hair out of his face. "My *point* is that even when I cause trouble, I try to make it not hurt WE 's operations in the long term. A few hours of chaos today didn't set anything back. I double-checked. I even got some projects ready for the board as an apology, because I'm *considerate.* "

He'd handed the board of directors his five-year-plan for WE as an apology for traumatizing them. They'd been upset until they started reading it, and then they'd said all was forgiven and Tim was a genius. Bruce had to literally drag Tim out of the room to lecture him because all the directors were alarmingly obsessed over the document, and wanted to promote him on the spot. It'd been a surreal reminder that these were the same people who'd looked and Brucie Wayne and let him control the company.

But that didn't matter! The point was, Tim was an expert in arranging his chaos to maximum (or minimum) effectiveness. People needed to give him more credit.

"You like your company, so I also like your company," Tim said, "It's that simple. But I also think it's pretty boring."

"I see, then maybe I should fire you . . . Temporarily, of course," Bruce said, releasing a big sigh. He reached over and ruffled Tim's hair, scratching his scalp just the way Tim liked. "You are awfully young to be working so hard. Practically an infant."

"Hey," Tim said, straightening. "I'm sixteen."

“And how old is that in dragon years?” Bruce said. “From what I understand, juveniles aren’t full-grown for a long time.”

Tim puffed, feeling several scales scratch his collar. Irritation always made it harder to stay in one shape. “Age is a social construct.”

Sure, it took dragons 30-40 years to fully develop, but Tim was growing *fast.* Like, worryingly fast. His adult venom hadn’t been supposed to come in until he was in his late twenties. So, technically, Tim was extremely mature, and Bruce’s argument was moot.

“Very funny,” Bruce said, tousling Tim’s hair. “I’ve seen you chewing on the kitchen counters. You’re practically teething.”

Tim made a token effort to bite the man’s fingers. Honestly, the slander he took was unreal. He just liked biting stuff. Couldn’t a dragon do that in peace?

“Watch it,” Bruce said without heat. He knew Tim wouldn’t bite him (hard). “And don’t think you’re out of the woods. I’ll let you take the rest of the summer off, but I’m still angry about today. There will be serious consequences.”

“That’s okay,” Tim purred. “Anger is good, healthy emotion. Dragon stamp of approval.”

That earned him an amused chuff. Tim rolled his eyes; his humans were so backwards about feelings, but at least Bruce was stabilizing. Doubtless, there’d be tons of lectures and punishments because of this, but it was worth it. Tim’s debts were cleared, and he was now a free dragon.

“Out of curiosity, why did you do it?” Bruce asked.

Tim debated not telling him, then decided it didn’t matter. Tam’s flight left two hours ago.

“It was a distraction,” he said proudly.

“A what?” Bruce asked.

Lucius' distant shout echoed off the walls. “Where the *bloody hell* is my daughter?!”

Tim giggled. He loved happy endings.

Chapter End Notes

So long, Tam! Enjoy your hard-won freedom. ;)

After The Incident:
Bruce: I’m sorry for the troubles my ward has caused. I’ve decided to suspend Tim’s internship for the foreseeable future. Once he’s mature enough for a position in the company, I’ll bring him back.
Board of Directors: Wait, what? No!
Bruce: No?
Directors *waving Tim’s five-year-plan*: This outline is genius! Bring the strange teenager back, Mr. Wayne. We can deal with his eccentricity if it means we can expand profit margins by 12%.
Bruce: …Excuse me?
Directors: We survived you, we can survive Tim Drake.
Bruce: You really, really can’t.
Directors: He’ll make us money! We want money!
Bruce: This is a monkey’s paw wish. Take it back while you still can.

Meanwhile, in Arkham

Secretary: Babe, are you awake?
OSHA lesbian: Yeah. . . what happened?
Secretary:: Dr. Quinzel bit through the ropes while we were making out, then hit us over the head with the popcorn bowl. She's long gone.
OSHA lesbian: Shit!
Secretary: We are terrible therapists.
OSHA lesbian: No kidding. Hurry, we might be too late!

Eat, Prey, Love

Chapter Summary

Something strange and hinky is going on, and Spoiler and Robin are on the case! (as soon as Tim escapes the Clocktower, that is.)

Chapter Notes

I've been lied to and betrayed. Melatonin is an evil drug that just makes me MORE energetic and ruins my sleep schedule. Life isn't fair.

Content warning for Dick and Babs' pet names, and fic-typical mentions of cannibalism (not Dick and Babs).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A couple days after Tam was settled wherever she was, she sent Tim a polite (for her) thank you text and asked how the distraction went. Tim sent her the video of the The Incident, and proudly told her he'd been fired.

Tam apologized for putting him in hot water with Bruce, but Tim considered the situation a win-win. Corporate life had been the albatross around his neck, but now he was free from its curse.

Tim paused, then shuddered. He'd just made a literary reference. Clearly, he was spending too much time with Jason. Disgusting.

The only downside to Tim's WE-revolution was that he was suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune (damn it, that was another literary reference). Bruce was making Tim take a ten-hour course on workplace behavior and communication, Alfred was making Tim polish *all* the silver, and Babs had hacked his tech and put parental controls on it.

The last one was the worst. It crossed the line from annoying to diabolical, then kept going straight into Satantic territory.

“Take it off!” Tim said, waving his tablet in front of her traitorous face. He’d come to the Clocktower to give her what for. “Babs, this is low, even for you.”

She swatted his hand away, unperturbed. “I should’ve done it years ago. You need supervision online.”

Tim growled, but again, Babs wasn’t intimidated. She was glued to eight monitors, and Tim couldn’t tell if she was tracking a shipment of drugs, hacking into Luthor’s database, or manipulating international trade. But the point was, she was ignoring his very dangerous aura and treating him like a *child.* Tim had never been a child, dragons skipped that developmental stage. He didn’t deserve this.

“Maybe *you* need supervision,” Tim said, eying the plugs. It’d be so easy to yank them out and power off her PC. “I’ve seen your search history.”

“Don’t get smart with me,” Babs said. “I’m an adult, and out of the two of us I’m the only one who’s *not* been accused of murder. Ergo, I’m more trustworthy.”

Tim hissed, but before he could reply with a devastating insult, someone pushed the window open.

“What was that?” Nightwing said as he crawled into the Clocktower. “Did someone say murder?”

“Nope, you misheard,” Babs said casually. “What’s up, sugar?”

Dick hit his head on the windowsill and swore, then limped into the seat next to Babs. “Nothing, my oogly woogly. Hey Tim, what’s with the face? You know, it’ll freeze like that.”

Tim hoped it did, that way everyone would know exactly what he was feeling. “You two disgust me.”

He'd come here to argue with Babs, not deal with *pet names.* No wonder Gordon had switched from cigarettes to Tums.

"We are disgustingly adorable," Dick said smugly. "If police work fails, I think I'll go into theatre."

Tim closed his eyes, mentally divorced himself from the flirting in front of him (Dick was half in Babs' lap) and got back to the *important rant* he'd been in the middle of.

"Dick, Babs messed with my Google," Tim said. "It won't let me go to any of the fun websites. Make her stop."

"He was researching cannibal island movies," Babs said blandly.

"See!?" Tim said. "How am I supposed to be creative when I can't even make fun of cringe human cinema?"

He liked to send Bart screenshots of the bad special effects, and now that entire hobby was *ruined.*

"Those sites had graphic images, Tim." Babs said.

"*I'm a vigilante!"*

Someone else knocked on the window. Batman unsnagged his cape from a protruding nail, and stepped into the room with a surprising amount of dignity. "Why are you all here instead of patrolling?"

"Justice!" Tim said, gesturing wildly with his tablet.

"Love," Dick cooed.

“I live here,” Babs said.

Bruce looked back at the window, like he was considering climbing back out.

Tim threw the tablet on the ground and gave his humans the sternest, most disappointed look he could muster. “You’re all the worst. I didn’t become Robin for this slander. Years of loyal service, and this is how you repay me? By taking away my Internet freedoms? You’re vindictive and cruel. How would you feel if I majorly inconvenienced you day in and day out?”

Everyone turned identical looks of exasperation on him. Clearly, they still weren’t getting the memo.

“Tim, it’s temporary,” Bruce said. “You can survive a few weeks without access to . . .” He glanced at the discarded tablet in confusion. “What were you looking at?”

“Forums discussing the ethics of love cannibalism,” Babs supplied.

“Yes, that.” Bruce said, running a hand over his face. “In fact, never look that up again.”

Tim knocked a glass of water off Babs’ desk and hissed. He’d look up what he wanted, thank you very much.

Bruce looked at the ceiling, face pinched. “It’s a punishment for a reason, Tim. This will teach you not to run amok at my company.”

“It was for a worthy cause,” Tim said primly. “I’d do it again, for free.”

He wasn’t ashamed to be a martyr, though being burned at the stake would be kinder than this. Sure, Tim could hack Babs code to override the parental controls, but it’d take *hours.* He’d rather complain until his humans caved.

“Tough luck, Timmy. Anyway, what are you doing here, B?” Dick asked, twirling a strand of Babs’ hair around his finger. “You’re not one to make social calls.”

Bruce took a seat in one of the uncomfortable fold-out chairs Babs used for guests. It creaked dangerously under his weight. “I’m looking for Jason. Has he stopped by today?”

Babs drained a can of coke, and snorted. “No, the little brat is probably in one of his lone wolf moods. He ditched our Bad Movie night.”

Tim looked up from the cables he was toeing, distracted from the pros and cons of biting them. (On one hand, it’d feel good on his teeth. On the other, electrical burns. Choices choices.) “You and Jason watch movies together? And you didn’t invite me?”

“We have lives outside you,” Babs said, which was patently false. “Anyway, Jason’s been AWOL all week. I haven’t spotted him on my cameras, but he’s probably slinking around the Alley like usual.”

“Hrn,” Bruce said, crossing his arms.

“You worried because of the crime spike?” Dick said, now braiding Babs’ hair. “Don’t worry, B. Jay can handle himself.”

Bruce “hrned” again, looking even broodier than usual. Tim squinted at him; was this—It *was*. Bruce was sad his kid was ghosting him. An emotional support child would be the only thing to pull him out of this funk.

Tim sighed. Well, it wasn’t like his Internet Freedom Campaign was going anywhere. He’d just hack the parental controls later. His calling was calling.

“Come on, B, let’s go,” Tim said, tugging on his favorite human’s arm. “There’s probably a crime happening somewhere, and I need my partner.”

“Alright, Champ, let’s go,” Bruce said, still distracted.

Tim made a mental note to feign an injury later. That always got Bruce to snap out of his malaise.

“Have fun, guys,” Dick said, now fully in Babs’ lap. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

That list was nonexistent, and therefore the advice was useless.

“You’re not going to patrol?” Tim said, cocking his head.

Dick shrugged. “Nah, Barbie and I need to go over some more wedding ideas. Right, toots?”

Babs snorted, still clicking away at her screen. “You betcha, tiger. I’ve got a few guest lists and some invitation mockups mocked up. We’re going over fonts today.”

Tim was suddenly very glad to be leaving.

“Hey, Timmy, want to be our ring bearer?” Dick said, looking way too excited to go over fonts.

“Do I get to keep the ring?” Tim asked.

“Yeah, sure. The wedding’s fake,” Dick said. “The current plan is for Babs to leave me at the altar, so the ring should be up for grabs afterward.”

Tim hummed. “Okay, I’ll think about it.”

He’d never say no to a shiny rock.

“Why is it that both of you insist on tormenting father figures?” Bruce said, face pinched.

“It’s fun,” Babs said without hesitation. Dick nodded eagerly, which was unsurprising. From what Tim understood, Dick had spent his entire childhood trying to give Bruce a heart attack.

“You’re a bad influence on Tim,” Bruce said, nudging Robin toward the window. “He’s already following in your footsteps.”

“I didn’t go out of my way torment Lucius,” Tim said. “That was just a byproduct of being a good person. I’m nothing like these cringe people.”

His crusade against WE had been in the name of friendship, which was a way worthier cause them a pretend romance. Tim would never be caught dead acting like Dick and Babs. This prank went well past revenge. At this point, they were just having fun being a fake couple, which was proof they were deranged.

“Hey, don’t mock our scheme,” Dick said, “We put a lot of thought into it.”

He nodded toward The Wall, which was a floor-to-ceiling monstrosity of wedding ideas, possible ways to create drama in Dick and Babs’ fake relationship, and twenty-million sticky notes with random doodles. The last time Tim looked it over, there had been things like *“ask Kori to be romantic rival? Possible cat fight on live TV?”, “pretend amnesia. Go by Ric? Only true love’s kiss will cure,”* and *“pregnancy scare”* scrawled on scrap paper.

Tim turned a dry expression toward the only sensible(ish) person in the building. “Come on, B. Let’s get out of here. The ick is too strong.”

He regretted coming to the Clocktower at all. There was too much PDA and psychological torture in it. It’d take multiple showers to wash it all off.

“Alright, champ, we’re leaving,” Bruce said. There was too much amusement in his tone. “Have fun you two.”

Dick and Babs gave a salute, and turned back to their screens. One of the monitors had their engagement pictures posted. Tim shuddered, and was the first to scuttle out the window.

“They’re still fake dating, right?” Tim said to B as they raced across the skyline. Tim had decided to piggyback with Bruce, rather than use his own grapple.

“According to them, yes,” Bruce said. Was he smug? He sounded smug.

“Dick’s right, he should go into theatre,” Tim said, pressing his cheek into Bruce’s shoulder. “He’d probably win an Oscar.”

Bruce just grunted. Tim rolled his eyes. He couldn’t wait to knock some middle-aged pimps unconscious. It’d be a great palette cleanser after hearing those horrible pet names.

***

A day later, Spoiler and Robin were minding their own business on patrol when they saw something strange and hinky.

Both vigilantes slowed, then paused to stare at the scene with mirrored confusion. Usually *they* were the strange and hinky ones. This was a disturbing inversion of the natural order.

“That’s one of your creepy bone shrines, right?” Steph said.

“Yeah,” Tim said.

“Why are people huddled around it?”

“No clue.”

It could be a cult was setting up shop. Tim didn’t know how comfortable he felt about that. On one hand, his grandmother (may she rest in pieces) had hoarded a small city of humans that may or may not have worshiped her, and they’d made great snacks after she got bored of them. On the other

hand, Bruce probably wouldn't let Tim follow in his family's footsteps and eat any disposable humans he added to his collection. (Snack humans were in a different category than Hoard humans, not that anyone cared.)

Another, lesser, worry was that if a cult was forming, they'd do things that were Not Okay. Tim's morals were nonexistent, but he didn't want humans doing things that went against his Robin brand after all the work he'd put into it.

"Let's investigate," Tim said.

He and Steph grappled to the neighboring roof to get a closer look. They were ordinarily stealthy, but Steph tripped on a loose brick and smacked Tim in the head. Both of them hit the roof with thuds and a muffled "ow!"

Naturally, the people on the roof heard and startled like cats. Delicious, tasty cats.

"Robin!" one of the guys yelled. "Robin, is that you? Please don't kill us. We come bearing gifts."

Steph and Tim exchanged another look, then peeked over the roof ledge at the shrine. Their surprise continued to grow, as did Tim's confusion.

A trio of rough-edged, scruffy humans was huddled near one of Tim's bone shrines. They were built like fridges and wore gray hoodies and old beanies. The breeze carried the smell of gunpowder and cigarettes, but even without that Tim would have recognized them. They were Jason's goons.

"What are you doing here?" Tim said, sitting up higher. "This isn't Crime Alley."

Were they lost? Maybe Tim should call Jason to collect his pet humans. It was bad practice to let them be free-range since they ran the risk of encountering other predators. Tim would know. He had chronic anxiety thinking about his hapless humans being away from his nest.

Of course, since Jason was AWOL, calling him would be pointless. Wherever he was apparently didn't have cell service. Or he'd lost his phone. Either way, his absence was stressing out Bruce and Alfred. Bad Jason, he knew better than this.

"About that," one of the goons said. He had a mouse tattoo on his arm, so he must've been Mickey. "We had to find you. We promise no crimes were committed, so you don't need to catch us."

"Or eat us," another one—Eric?—said.

Steph popped up next to Tim. "Robin doesn't eat people. We've trained him not to. Stop giving him ideas."

The goons shuddered in tandem, much to Tim's delight. He loved making random humans squeamish.

"Just in case, we brought you this," Mickey said. He held up a plastic bag with a dead goldfish in it. "A symbol of our good intent."

Tim perked up. How did they know what his favorite childhood snack was? Peace offering accepted.

"Does Hood know where you are?" Tim asked. He grappled to them and perched on top of the shrine—which was a gargoyle he'd decorated with various trinkets—and made grabby hands for the bag. "You know it's dangerous not to let people know where you're going. If there's an accident, nobody would realize you died."

That was what the Waynes and Jack told Tim *constantly.* It seemed only fair to parrot the words to wayward humans, who were no doubt the intended audience for that wisdom. (Steph needed to stop side-eying him. Tim was exempt because he was a dragon, obviously.)

"The boss needs help," Mickey said, tossing Tim the bag. "That's why we came looking for you."

That derailed the witty banter Tim had planned. He froze, fingers curled around his prize, and bared his human teeth. *"What?"*

Beside him, Steph went from rolling her eyes to paying attention. Tim saw her tap her comm to start recording the conversation.

"Something's wrong. He ain't listening to us," The last goon said. *Kevin* was embroidered on his jacket, and Tim had fond memories of tying him up in the rafters of a warehouse last year. "Some of our guys went to check on him and got shot."

"They okay?" Steph said.

"In the *head,*" Mickey finished.

Steph winced. "So, no."

Tim frowned. Jason killed his own people? That didn't sound right. Jason had a moral code on par with B's. It involved more killing, but only when he found someone that met his criteria, and Jason didn't hire people like that.

"We don't know what's wrong, but he's off his rocker," Eric said. "He wouldn't even listen when I started quoting Shakespeare at him."

"Mind control?" Steph whispered to Tim.

"Maybe," Tim whispered, then turned to the goons. "When did this start?"

"A couple days ago," Mickey said. "At least, that was when we noticed, but he's been out of contact all week. We thought you'd kidnapped him again."

Tim was starting to go from worried to *really* worried. *This* was why letting Jason live outside the nest was a bad idea. If something happened, Tim found out too late. If Jason died again, Tim

doubted a phone call with Janet would be enough to calm him down. He'd been easy to comfort when he was younger, but that ship had long since sailed.

"I know the boss and the Bats have their differences, but he's a good employer, and this isn't like him," Mickey continued. "You gotta help him."

"Of course," Steph said, grabbing Tim's shoulder. "We'll do that. Thanks, dudes, Spoiler and Robin are on the case. Happy crime, I guess."

"Thank you," Kevin said. "Just be careful. He's been acting odd, not even counting the weird upgrade on his helmet."

Tim tightened his fists. "Upgrade?"

That screamed Mad Hatter, which meant Tim had a *target.*

"Yeah. The eyes," Eric said. "He changed the LED lights in them or something. They're bright green."

Steph inhaled sharply, and Tim was a second away from doing the same.

"Cool, cool, cool, nice to know, not alarming at all," Steph said. "Come on, Rob."

She tugged Tim away from the shrine with badly disguised alarm. Tim stuffed the goldfish snack into his utility belt and took off, licking the air to try and catch Jason's scent.

"Hold on, Boy Wonder," she said when they were a block away. "Take a breath."

"There's no time for that, Spoy," Tim said, whirling on her. "Jason needs us!"

Green eyes meant Pit Madness, which meant murder sprees, which meant once Jason was sane again he'd be full of emotions like guilt and shame over his violent actions. Granted, Tim didn't know if Jason would hurt innocents (his goons weren't innocent by a long stretch), so maybe he wouldn't be *too* upset, but a return to his duffel bag era wouldn't be doing anyone favors.

"Exactly. We have to be smart about this," Steph said. "Use your brain, Tim. What happened last time Jason was pit mad?"

" . . . I got yummy treats?" Tim said.

Steph pinched the bridge of her nose. "Aside from that."

Tim didn't feel the need to rehash any of that. Jason's revenge arc was self-explanatory and everybody in the hoard had heard it at least six times since the guy wouldn't shut up about it. Frankly, it was a relief that he'd calmed down once the Joker was dead.

Oh.

"He stopped being crazy once there wasn't a reason to be mad," Tim said.

"Yup," Steph said. "So if we want to fix things, we have to figure out what triggered him."

Tim didn't say it often enough, but Steph was smart. No wonder he was hoarding her.

"I've sent Babs the conversation recording," Steph said. "She'll do a camera search for Jason while we investigate why he's gone green. Nightwing and Batman are rerouting their patrols, so it's all hands on deck."

"Thanks, Spoy," Tim said. He turned North, heading toward Crime Alley with her hot on his heels. "How did you do that so fast?"

"It's a neat little trick called communicating," she said. "You should try it sometime."

***

Breaking into Jason's apartment took twenty minutes. His security system was irritatingly good. Usually, Tim would be happy about that, but right now he was mad that it made collecting his zombie harder. He ended up spitting acid on the alarms and kicking the door down to save time.

A quick glance around the room showed that it'd been trashed. Furniture was overturned, holes had been punched in the walls, and the floor was covered in used ammunition that'd been fired into the ceiling. It was a good thing Jason lived on the top floor, or someone could've been hurt.

"Yeesh, I wonder what pissed him off," Steph said, stepping over a handgun that'd been thrown to the side. "Maybe a deal gone south? Or someone trying to step into his territory?"

They split up to search. Steph went to check the other rooms while Tim surveyed the main area. His eyes snagged on a laptop that'd been flung into the corner.

He plugged the charger back in and tried a few passwords. Jason's death-day was the correct code (because he was dependably dramatic) and Tim restored the browser windows. It was a civilian laptop, so Tim wasn't holding his breath that there'd be anything important, but at least it'd give a window into Jason's madness.

Firefox finished loading, and Tim felt the air punch from his lungs. Nope, this explained everything. Even he knew this was bad, and probably unfixable.

"Nothing in the bedroom, but his bathroom is disgusting," Steph said, walking back into the room. "You'd think Jason never heard of rust remover. I almost got tetanus from looking at the tap—"

"Spoy, I figured it out," Tim said, cutting her short. "It's really bad."

She lost her joking tone. "How bad?"

Tim motioned her toward the screen. *"Bad."*

She leaned over his shoulder to read the article Tim had found pulled up, and froze. Tim was glad to know he wasn't the only one who realized why Jason had lost it.

ART OR SACRILEGE? INFLUENCER BURNS LITERARY TREASURE AS STATEMENT PIECE.

Patricia Lucas, women' s rights activist and Instagram model, recently acquired a signed, first-edition copy of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein for a sum of 2.4 million dollars. At a rally in New York City this September, Lucas symbolically ripped out individual pages to be burned in memoriam of forgotten female authors. While viral, Lucas' actions have sparked controversy in literary circles for the destruction of a beloved, irreplaceable novel. Lucas has responded to criticism by stating that if these people valued the book to this degree, they should have outbid her at auction.

Steph looked up, eyes wide as dinner plates. "We're so screwed."

"Yup," Tim said.

Jason wasn't going to stop until this stupid model's entire family was dead.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no, the book. Anyway . . .

Meanwhile, in Arkham:

OSHA Lesbian: What the hell is this?
Secretary: A happy ending?
OSHA lesbian: We live in Gotham. Try again.
Secretary: I dunno, they seem to have come to an understanding.

Harley *pressed against the plexiglass wall outside Ivy's cell*: But babe, I can get you out. You can be free!
Ivy: No, I'm going to do this right. I'm going to put the work into changing, and once I'm out, I'm taking you to a candle-lit dinner for two. I've been in and out of therapy for years, Dr.

Quinzel, but you're the only person that's made me want to fix myself. Please give me the chance to try.
Harley: Stop, you're making me fall in love with you more. I think you're the one for me, Pam. I can't wait.
Ivy: I think you're the one for me, that's why I'm going to.
Harley: Fine. If you put it that way, I guess I can scrap the escape attempt.
Ivy: ☺ ☺ ☺

OSHA lesbian: Damn, I should've brought my popcorn.
Secretary: Think that could be us someday?
OSHA lesbian: I thought we were like that already?
Secretary *putting her hands into her pockets to hide the shape of the ring box*: Yeah, you right.

Ex-Arkham Director in the next cell over: BOO! I don't want to see this. Go get a room, and give me my job back!

Pride & Punishment

Chapter Summary

Jason is here to read books and take names, and he's all out of books.

Chapter Notes

For once, Tim is the voice of reason . . . ish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The influencer did *what?"* Dick yelled over the comms.

"I know!" Steph said. "I'm not saying murder is right, but that thing was worth 2.4 million dollars. Imagine how many waffles she could've bought with that. She doesn't deserve to have money if this is how she treats it."

Tim and Steph ran through the streets, keeping an eye out for green eyes and red helmets. They'd barely stuck around the apartment long enough to check that Jason hadn't bought a ticket to NYC to kill what's-her-face. Luckily (or unluckily) Jason seemed too far gone to have that kind of cognitive function. The upsurge of crime in Crime Alley was making a lot more sense, but with horrific implications.

"Forget the money, what about the cultural significance?" Dick continued yelling. "God, no wonder Little Wing is cuckoo for cocopuffs. We have to help him."

Bruce grunted over the comms. It translated to an entire paragraph of worry, complete with regret at not bidding at the auction.

Tim also regretted that. Tim didn't like reading books, but he knew Jason loved them more than certain dead relatives. There were dangerously high odds that this was just as (if not more traumatic) than his bio-mom selling him to the Joker. Jason had asked them not to bid (something about Tim being too dangerous to exist in close proximity to the book) but he shouldn't have

listened to the crime lord's ravings. Clearly, Jason was too emotionally compromised to be trusted with these things.

"No luck finding out where he might be," Babs said over the comms. "For being high on artificial rage, he's irritatingly good at dodging my cameras."

Tim's burst of pride (competent hoard member!) was undercut by his horror (missing hoard, plus mentally unstable hoard member). Bizarrely, it reminded him of how Bruce said he felt whenever Tim turned his trackers off.

Dangit, why didn't Jason wear any of those? Didn't he know how much Tim worried? So many problems could be solved if he put aside his pride and let Tim stalk him from a safe distance. But no, he had to be "edgy" and "independent." After he was back in his right mind, Tim was going to make him take remedial hoard member classes.

"We'll split up," Batman growled. "If you spot him, do not engage until we are all in the area. Hood is highly trained and lacks his usual control. Do not test his limits."

Everyone barked an affirmative into the comms except Tim. He was too frazzled to give a verbal response, but Steph was with him. She saw his nod, so she knew he'd heard the instructions too.

Retaining them was a different matter, and Tim made no promises about that.

***

All was quiet until 1 AM, when Oracle pinged them with a report of gunshots at the docks. It was either two gangs fighting for territory or an entire drug operation desperately trying to hold off the Red Hood from a murder spree. Without going there in person, there was no way to tell.

Nightwing, Batman, Robin, and Spoiler homed in on the area like moths to a flame. Gotham was all fog and drizzle, shrouded in a coffin of rain. It coated the lenses of Tim's domino mask and made the roads slippery. Tim almost fell while grappling between two sky scrapers. He slid down the cable and onto a lower rooftop to catch his balance. Steph glanced back to make sure he was okay, then kept going when he gave her a thumbs up.

Unable to make up lost ground, Tim fell behind. When Steph was a block ahead, he paused. There had been a slight breeze, and it'd brought a smell to his attention. Tim licked the air, coating his tongue with Gotham's petrichor. Beneath the oil and filth was a burnt, caustic scent that made Tim's hackles raise.

Gunfire and blood, tinged with acid green hate.

"Spoy," Tim said into his comm. "Come back. He's this way."

"*Robin?"* she replied, voice gritty. *"Can you say that again? The rain is making the signal—"*

A gunshot echoed off the buildings. Tim ran toward it, comm forgotten.

He dropped to street level and ducked around a corner. The buildings in this part of town were old brickwork covered in coal stains. Trash lined the alleyways, and the storm drains were flooded. Tim jumped over a pile of discarded syringes. Dealers. Well, that explained why Jason was in the area. Lucid or not, Jason followed a routine. If he found evidence of people breaking his rules while patrolling, odds were his reaction would be worse than usual.

Tim's hunch proved correct as he rounded a final corner and came face to face with the Red Hood.

Jason stood in the middle of the street, head bowed and guns smoking. By his feet were two men wearing Triad colors. Neither were moving, and the puddles next to them were pink and red.

"Hood?" Tim said, looking up from the bodies. "You okay?"

Stupid question. He obviously wasn't. But it was polite to ask and Jason appreciated good manners, even if he pretended not to.

Jason didn't reply. The rasp of his breathing echoed off the buildings, robotic and raw from his helmet's filter. His head snapped up, and his eyes met Tim's through the helmet. They glowed lurid,

electric green.

“It’s okay, Hood, it’s me,” Tim said, putting his hands up. For once, he regretted having an ominous aura. It was hard to calm people down when their animal instincts were screaming at them. “Your buddies said you were having an episode. I’m all for rage, but I think you should at least get to choose to be mad. Otherwise, you’ll get all dramatic about losing your agency, or something stupid.”

Tim edged closer as he talked, hoping to get within grabbing range. Normally, he wouldn’t hesitate to pounce on Jason. But normally Tim didn’t have to worry about getting shot because he’d moved too fast.

The comm buzzed in his ear. Bruce and Dick were telling him to stand down, but it was a bit late for that. Hood had Tim in his sights, and if he tried to run there’d be a bullet in his calf. Or somewhere more important. Tim was engaging whether he liked it or not. Where was Steph? He hadn’t left her *that* far behind, had he?

“I know why you’re mad, and it’s totally valid,” Tim said, taking another step forward. He just had to stall a little longer. “But you don’t need to shoot random people. That won’t fix things. Besides, it’ll make B sad.”

Jason’s hand twitched. Tim hoped that was a sign he was becoming more lucid.

Behind the crime lord, Tim saw a flash of purple. Steph was on the second story of the apartment, balanced on a flagpole. Her mask covered her whole face, but the lenses were narrowed in concentration.

Okay. Good. Tim was the distraction, she was the muscle. And from the sound of his comm, Bruce and Dick were close by. Even if it came down to a fight, they had this handled.

“Everything’s fine. B will help you get revenge for your book, Dick will give you hugs, and Alfred will read you Beatrice Potter or something,” Tim said, reaching out toward Jason. “Let’s go home.”

For a second, he thought it’d end peacefully. Jason had let him approach, and his breathing had evened out. More than that though, was that Tim felt safe around Jason. He’d never been directly

hurt by him, even at his worst. Plus, he was a dragon. He wasn't scared of anything.

Tim tugged Jason's sleeve, hoping to lead him to the corner to escape the rain, and felt his human tense.

"*Tim!"* he heard Steph yell into the comm.

Too late.

Jason twisted and spun. One moment Tim was cooing to his hoard member, the next, the pommel of a titanium pistol smashed into his face and knocked him off his feet.

It also knocked out several teeth. It was hard to tell how many since his mouth felt like a pincushion and was dribbling blood. Ow, ow, *ow.* Why had—?

A loud *click* was the only warning Tim had. He rolled to the side and barely avoided a bullet to the skull. The bullet lodged into the asphalt, leaving a smoking trail in its wake.

"*Jay!"* Tim said, horrified.

Those were real bullets!

Jason cocked the gun again. There wasn't a trace of recognition in his eyes. Tim didn't know how to handle that. Bite? Not bite? If he chomped too hard, he could tear Jason's leg off. Plus, his acid was pooling in his mouth alongside the blood.

Luckily, Steph had his back.

"It's Brittney, bitch!" she yelled, dropkicking Hood as she fell two storeys onto his head. "Get someone else to murder. Or better yet, shoot yourself!"

She followed up her attack with a roundhouse to Jason's head and a brick to his gut. Jason dodged with the grace of the wind, but had to focus all his attention to not getting brained by Spoiler's next attack.

Tim scrambled to his feet so he could help (Jason was off-guard, but he'd shot at *him.* That meant Steph wasn't safe either, and hurting her wasn't allowed) but before Tim could do anything, Dick was running past, escrima sticks sparking and Batman hot on his heels, both so angry the rain practically steamed as they engaged with Hood.

Thunder stolen and face bleeding, Tim blinked in surprise as his hoard ganged up on Jason with righteous, protective fury. Dick disarmed both his pistols, Bruce was using his grapple as a bola, and Steph was systematically targeting Hood's helmet interface with a portable EMP.

All of them were being *much* more violent than Tim had expected.

Well.

Tim spat out one of his front teeth, and decided to let them handle it. He'd hit the ground hard, and he was starting to suspect his teeth weren't the only thing he'd broken. Jaws were supposed to move, weren't they?

***

The stark light of the doctor's office burned into Tim's skull. It smelled like plastic and disinfectant, which was the opposite of comfortable. He wanted to go home, but Bruce wasn't letting him.

"Just a little longer, champ," Bruce said. "Promise."

Tim glared at him, ice pack still covering his face. As far as he was concerned, they could've already *been* home. Jason was locked in an isolation chamber, and Tim was sick of getting updates from his phone from Steph. From the sound of things, his zombie was still stark raving mad, and nobody was sure how to get the pit out of his system. They needed Tim there, but Bruce was making him get medical attention. Silly, stupid human.

Leslie Tompkins walked back in, frowning at the X-ray she'd taken of Tim's mouth.

"Your eight front teeth were shattered," she said bluntly. "I can get the leftover pieces out, but you need an oral surgeon to fix the rest of the damage. Either way, I want you to stay the night here. You hit your head on the asphalt, and I want to monitor that in case it gets worse."

"I'm fineb," Tim said through the wad of bloody cotton in his mouth. "Donb neeb a denbisb."

His teeth would grow back in a couple of hours, and his head felt *fine.* This wasn't even the top ten worst injury he'd gotten. Although he wouldn't say no to getting the chunks of useless teeth yanked out while he was here. If they weren't removed, he'd have to do it himself. Or, worse, wait for his new teeth push them out, which itched like crazy.

"Don't argue with me, young man," Leslie said. Her glare was Alfred worthy.

Tim attempted to blow a raspberry at her, but all that did was make him cut his tongue on one of his broken teeth.

"Thank you, Leslie," Bruce said, taking the X-ray. His face twitched unhappily as he looked at it. "We'll arrange that."

"You'd better," Leslie said sharply. "Your kid either needs implants or dentures, and he isn't even eighteen. Was it worth putting him in tights, Batman?"

Bruce sighed, even as Tim glowered. Was that judgment he heard? *Please,* he got enough of that from Gordon.

"I'b fibe," Tim said again. "Stob worrying. I've had worse."

Leslie pursed her lips. If anything, it looked like she was worrying harder.

Tim wanted to tell her she was being stupid. Statistically speaking, he was the Robin with the least injuries—unless they counted his at-home injuries, which Tim didn't—so she needed to lighten up.

"Oral surgeon," she told Bruce. "And he needs to stay off the streets until he's completely recovered."

Bruce grunted and Tim rolled his eyes. Neither bothered to tell her that aside from the bruising, Tim would be right as rain by the next day. He may not have had a healing factor, but regrowing half his teeth was child's play.

"Cab we go now?" Tim asked, tugging on Bruce's cape.

"After we get your mouth fixed," Bruce said.

Tim groaned, but worked his jaw open and nodded toward the pliers. He was lucky the bone had only been dislocated, not broken.

Leslie, if anything, looked even more annoyed when Tim said he didn't need anesthetic. She gave it to him anyway, and Tim spent the next hour getting bits of broken teeth out of his mouth while he inwardly fumed.

Jason needed him. He didn't have time to waste here. He really, *really* hoped his zombie was alright.

***

He wasn't.

It took Jason four days to come down from his pit episode. Adding in the previous few days where he'd been AWOL, that meant he'd been on a green-tinged bender for over a week. Tim did not envy him, especially since as soon as Jason was himself again, he started throwing up green vomit.

Tim could relate; emotions made him want to hurl too. Enhanced ones had to be even worse. He was so ready for this to be over.

Bruce ran some tests while Jason was a shaking mess, and it turned out that Jason still had plenty of green rage goop in his body. It just didn't get activated until he had a strong, emotional reaction. Given that Jason was the walking definition of strong, emotional reactions, that wasn't good. But his minor flares were controllable. It was only when stupid, whiny influencers defaced historic artifacts that anyone had to worry.

Speaking of whiny influencers, there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth when Jason remembered what befell his beloved book. He went through the five stages of grief several times—in various stages of Shakespearean agony—before he slumped on the floor and despaired.

"I made a mistake," he sobbed. "I never should've let her go. Mary, whhhhhhhy."

Tim dumped a stack of emergency regency romances through the slot in the wall, desperate to make the tears stop.

Dick, Bruce, and Alfred swore to help Jason get non-murderous vengeance on the influencer, but the damage had been done. Even if Patricia Lucas spent the rest of her life in abject misery, it wouldn't change the fact that part of Jason's hoard was ash.

"Don't worry, baby Jay, we'll avenge you," Dick said, face pressed against the glass of the containment cell. They were keeping Jason contained an extra day in case the Pit Madness was lingering. "Slade still owes me a favor. He can make it look like an accident—"

"No murder," Bruce said, even as Tim perked up. "Death is too good for her."

Jason was still tuning everyone out to monologue, but plans were quickly made among the rest of the Waynes to sue, humiliate, and torment the book burning psycho. Tim's vote to maul her was, sadly, overruled, but everyone had looked tempted by the suggestion, so it didn't feel like a complete loss.

Once Dick ran out of the room to start The Reckoning (Alfred following at a disturbingly sedate pace) Tim turned to Bruce and tugged on his sleeve. The Dark Knight bent down so Tim could (on

tiptoes) whisper into his ear.

“Can we ask Barry to go back in time and save the book?” Tim asked.

Bruce’s face twitched. “Probably not. The space-time continuum is a delicate balance.”

Tim nodded and thought for a moment. “Okay, then I’ll ask Bart.”

Bruce’s face twitched again, this time with faint alarm. “You know what, I’ll ask Barry.”

Hmm. Close enough.

Tim taped a phone to the outside of the cell to livestream WE’s public statement about the defacing of literature, the publication of an article written by Clark on modern book burning, and the announcements made by the Jane Austen society about how Patricia Lucas was their sworn enemy until the end of time.

Jason seemed much calmer after hearing that the world was on his side. It helped that Bruce was on the phone with Barry, negotiating a potential time-travel trip to save the original copy.

“Hope isn’t lost?” Jason said after a few hours of those articles on loop. His voice was raw.

“Nope,” Tim said, pleased beyond words.

Finally, this wretched slew of emotions would be over.

***

Unfortunately for Tim, it wasn’t. The next day, he came pounding down the stairs for quality time with Jason, only to find him despairing. *Again.*

“Is he broken?” Tim asked Bruce. “Why is he sad? Lucas is getting sued!”

Jason wasn’t sad about the influencer. It was much worse than that. He was guilty about knocking Tim’s teeth out. He couldn’t look Tim in the eye and apologized on hands and knees. Obviously, this couldn’t stand.

“It’s okay,” Tim told him, sitting criss-cross outside the cell. His emotional threshold was over its limit, and it wasn’t even noon. “You’re allowed to hurt me if you want. It just surprised me, is all.”

Jason choked, and Dick dropped the lunch tray he’d been carrying. Everybody flinched at the loud, metallic clank.

“Excuse me?” Dick said. “What did you say?”

Tim rubbed his ear. “That I was surprised.”

Bruce sat by Tim, stony faced. “Before that.”

Tim cocked his head. “Jason can hurt me if he wants. I don’t mind.”

It was simple math; hoard upset? Violence was the answer? Done and done. It wasn’t like it was a big deal. Tim didn’t have a healing factor, but he bounced back quick. Exhibit A, his teeth were sparkly, shiny and completely new. No fuss, no muss.

Jason slammed his hand on the glass. “I mind! What the hell, Baby Bird. That is not okay.”

“First off, nobody asked you,” Tim said. “Second, you’re hoard. It’s my job to take care of you, and if you have to get your wiggles out by attacking me, that’s just how it is.”

He wouldn't let just *anyone* attack him, of course. The Waynes were special. They should be proud of that, and how generous and sweet he was being.

Rather than say "thank you, that's so thoughtful," everyone just looked vaguely ill. Dick was especially queasy, and the others were doing great statue impersonations. Tim felt like he was missing something.

"That is *not* 'how I get my wiggles out.'" Jason turned to Bruce. "Fix this."

Bruce nodded. "We need to have a talk, Tim."

Wait, what? Why? Did they think he was a masochist or something? Were they going to shame him about that? No, that couldn't be right. Tim had seen Bruce's list of exes, that'd be like the pot calling the kettle black. Besides, Tim didn't like getting hurt. He'd just let it happen if it was his hoard because he cared about them. That meant he wanted them to be happy, even if it meant he had to be somewhat miserable. It was simple math.

Too bad it didn't seem to be adding up for the Waynes. Explaining this was going to be difficult, wasn't it?

***

There were some relationship things Tim was struggling with. Most of which, Babs said he should have retained from the abuse articles she made him memorize when he was fourteen.

Exhibit A, it wasn't okay for people to hurt him. Period.

Exhibit B, saying "but they're hoard!" didn't change that.

The conversation circled around both these points until Tim stalked out of the cave to sulk. Unfortunately, avoidance didn't make the problem go away. Bruce escalated by calling Jack to figure out how to talk to Tim about this.

Jack was characteristically upset, especially since Janet was on the same wavelength as Tim, which he'd apparently thought he'd trained out of her after over twenty years of marriage (fool). She was now getting similar lectures about boundaries and personal safety, which was no doubt ruining their weekend trip to Montreal.

Tim was also having a miserable time. Telling his humans that Tim didn't particularly care about his safety (because he was a dragon, and therefore hard to harm) didn't help. Neither did saying that they didn't have to worry about him and should just focus on being happy so Tim could be. Apparently, those were red flags.

"But I've been saying this for years," Tim protested mid-lecture on the third day of well-intentioned purgatory. "You never had a problem with it before."

Bruce grunted unintelligibly as he paced the living room.

"We didn't realize how far you were taking it before," Dick said on the couch next to Tim. "I'm really, *really* glad you hoarded us, Tim. It could've gone badly for both you and your mother if You'd chosen people with less morals."

Morals? What did morals have to do with this? Tim crossed his arms and grumbled about stupid humans as the Waynes went back to the lecture.

This was weird. And confusing. Tim wasn't sure what he'd done wrong this time. Maybe it was because he *hadn't* done much when Jason was rogue? Tim could've transformed and pinned Jason after being hit, but he'd been too surprised to do anything except dodge.

Still, even then he hadn't *let* Jason beat him up. The guy had just caught him off-guard. Although, it had crossed Tim's mind later that if he suspected it'd have helped cure pit madness, he would've given Jason permission, but that was a non-issue. The Waynes were just overreacting, as usual.

It was Alfred who helped clear things up. On the fourth day, he sat Tim down with some of his favorite snacks (raw shrimp and dry spaghetti) and told him he couldn't think like that anymore.

“If you are hurt, it will impair your ability to protect your hoard,” Alfred said. “Being injured will not help anybody, master Tim. It will only make your loved ones emotionally distraught and cloud their judgment. Not to mention that should a rival dragon appear and you are not in peak condition, it could endanger your nest.”

That made sense. Tim felt relief at the easy-to-understand words.

“Thanks, Alfred, I’ll be more careful,” Tim said. “I wouldn’t want anyone to be upset.”

Consequences, logic, *actual* reasons. Why hadn’t Bruce and the others just told him this?

Alfred still looked a little sad, but his shoulders loosened. “I’m glad to hear it, master Tim. That’s a start in the right direction.”

He straightened Tim’s collar, then left him to his snacks. Tim heard him talk to Bruce in the hall, and tell him he’d “done what he could at the moment.” Bruce’s sigh made Tim feel guilty again, and a bit irritated.

He bit into a shrimp, ripping it to pieces like cotton candy. Jason was sane again, Tim’s mouth was healing, and everything was *fine,* so why were people walking on eggshells? They knew Tim had a different head-space than they did. Why was this any different from their normal miscommunications?

Tim recalled the Waynes’ recent discussions about boundaries and accommodation. According to them, Tim had a habit of saying nothing until it was too late. They wouldn’t know there was a problem unless he called them out on it, but Tim had been *working* on that. He was getting better at telling them when things bothered him. But this *wasn’t a problem.*

He’d told them so many times he’d do anything for them. Why did realizing the reality of that distress them?

Humans made no sense at all.

Chapter End Notes

The ballad of the book:

Barry: Bats, I've got the first edition, limited-edition signed copy of Frankenstein you wanted.
Bruce: tha-
Bart: I also have one!
Bruce: What?
Jessie Chambers: Batman, I heard this was mission-critical, so I worked as fast as I could. Here's the book.
Johhny Quick: It was a team effort, but if you want I can go grab a second one as well.
Wally: I came as soon as I could! Where's the event-horizon we can only stop with this sci-fi book?
Bart: I'M BACK AGAIN. I GOT ALL THE BOOKS! Every first edition is ours!
Bruce (quietly, with feeling): What is happening?
Max *sigh*: Why don't we ask your Robin? He tried to recruit me too.
Bruce: TIM!

Tim's rationale was why have one speedster go it when you could have all of them? The more books the better, right? This was, in fact, not a good idea. It almost caused a time paradox, and now several newspapers from 1818 have articles about human-shaped lightning robbing bookstores. It took all day to get the speedsters to put the books back, and there was a lot of yelling involved. If the Flashfam weren't obsessed with dragons, they'd probably have held a grudge about the whole thing. ;)

The Destructive Habits of Timmys

Chapter Summary

Summer is coming to a close, for better and for worse.

Chapter Notes

I want to say we're close to the end of part 4, and we are! . . . but not as close as I'd like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aside from the irritating communication fumble from his humans, Tim thought that things post-Pit incident were going pretty good. The book was safe, the Flashes were adding a Tim-clause to their time travel rules (all communication from him had to be CCed and approved by Batman), and Jason was sane again. There was nothing not to like, aside from his zombie's horrible coping mechanisms.

"For the last time, you don't need to 'atone' for not buying the book," Tim said, kicking his feet against the counter at *MWS Books.* "Stop making yourself a martyr, Jason. It's a bad look."

Jason paused his sweeping and glared at Tim. "If you don't like my attempts at restitution, you can go home. I'm taking this seriously."

Tim looked him up and down. "Dressed like that?"

Jason was decked out in over-sized cargo pants, a *Jane Austen Stan since 1787* T-shirt, and a hot pink apron covered in pins with book quotes on them. It was an employee uniform that Dick would've been delighted to wear. Tim hated it.

"I'm repping the store," Jason said. "Again, if you don't like it, *leave.* I'm sure Steph would be happy to hang out with you."

Tim popped a wad of chewing gum into his mouth and swallowed the wrapper. “No.”

He was on Jason-sitting duty. Dick and Bruce liked to hover, but they also said Jason “needed his space” and other ridiculous things. Morons. Tim wasn’t letting Jason out of his sight until he was sure the zombie was safe from evil emotions like guilt. And a good thing too! If he hadn’t stalked Jason, he’d never had known the guy was volunteering in retail.

“Peter? Are you done sweeping the front?” Joanne, the little old lady who ran the place said. She peeked around a door and held up a plastic tray. “My grandson brought snicker-doodles, if you and your brother would like some.”

“We’re not br—” Tim began.

Jason shoved a cookie into his mouth.

“Thanks, Aunt Jo,” Jason said while Tim choked on cinnamon sugar. “We’ll polish the tray off for you.”

“Aren’t you a dear,” she said, then handed Jason the tray. She pinched his cheek before leaving to do old lady things.

Tim shuddered. Joanna was way too gooey and feely. How could she call herself a proper grandmother if she wasn’t trying to eat the younger generation? Didn’t she hoard books too? Letting Jason get within a hundred miles of her treasures was stupid. He was prime competition for her stuff.

“I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again,” Jason said, leaning against the counter. “I’m *fine.* The Pit is dormant again. Unless tragedy strikes, I’ll be fine.”

Tim took another bite of his cookie, suspicious. “Define tragedy.”

“Someone defaces the Mona Lisa,” Jason said. “Or the Sistine Chapel burns down.”

Great, now Tim had to protect art on the other side of the world. Jason was so high maintenance.

“If you’re so fine, how come you’re working here?” Tim said. “You own a crime empire. You’ll burn out.”

“This is just a weekend thing,” Jason said. “Jo’s grandson assists every once in a while, but he’s got a full-time gig as a bodyguard, so it’s hit or miss. I’ve got to protect her books from the Patricias of the world.”

Jason looked stoically into the distance, as if that were a calling of Arthurian proportions. Tim missed the days he nailed dead birds to walls. It was a much better hobby.

“Patricia Lucas is being sued by multiple historical societies and was banned from all social media ever,” Tim said blandly. “There’s nothing more to avenge. Besides, you literally fight supervillains. Influencers are small potatoes.”

“They *influence people,* Tim,” Jason said. “That’s bad enough. And stop judging me. Nobody asked you to be here.”

“Yet, I came,” Tim said, grabbing more cookies. “Now, I suffer.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Brat.”

He went back to sweeping the floor, then passive-aggressively nudged Tim off the counter so he could polish its glass display. Tim tried to help, but whenever he drifted toward the paperback section he got swatted back by the broom. Jason still didn’t trust him around reading material, more’s the pity. Tim had been excited to tear out some pages in the mystery section.

Joanne tottered back in and started talking nerd to Jason. Worse, she kept trying to include Tim in the conversation and recommend him books. It was almost a relief when his phone rang.

“One second,” he told her before walking to the window seat and putting his phone to his ear. “Hello? Oh, hi Dad, what’s up?”

Tim frowned as he listened to Jack. The frown got deeper and deeper over the next thirty seconds. Tim dug his toe into the ground, leaving a scuff on the hardwood.

“Okay, cool,” he said. “Thanks for telling me. I’ll stop by tonight.”

He ended the call, shoved the phone into his pocket, and stood in the middle of the room, statue still. He kept digging his toe into the floor.

“Timmy, what’s up?” Jason said, tapping his shoulder.

Tim shrugged. “Nothing.”

Jason raised his eyebrows.

“My parents are leaving Gotham soon,” Tim said, unsure exactly what he was feeling. “That’s all.”

Jason started to say something, but Tim decided to take his zombie up on his request, and stormed out of the bookshop without a second glance.

***

That night, Tim had dinner with his parents. As far as family events went, it was a smashing success. Nobody was killed, injured, or insulted. That was ten for ten, but Tim left in a sour move.

Jack and Janet were heading to Buenos Aires in a couple weeks, then following that up with a stint in São Paulo. All the international business Jack had been putting off so he could visit Gotham was catching up, and they couldn’t continue rescheduling it. In what felt like no time at all, Tim’s parents would be gone, and it’d be back to video calls.

That was fine. Great, even. Tim was pleased by this. Dare he say, effulgent with joy, and he'd made sure to tell Jack that in extreme detail.

Everything was *fine.*

"Late night, master Tim?" Alfred commented when Tim kicked open the front door.

He grunted at the butler, and slammed the mahogany shut so hard the hinges rattled. Then, for good measure, he knocked over the hat stand.

"Master Timothy!" Alfred said sharply.

Tim hissed, then slunk upstairs. On his way up he shoulder-checked Cass (who had just gotten home from California) and knocked a vase off its plinth. In his room, he curled in front of his window and glowered at Drake manor.

His keen senses could hear his hoard muttering to each other a few floors below, the wind in the trees outside, and the hum of electricity in the walls. But they couldn't tell whether Jack and Janet were packing yet, or if they were already gone.

The last thing he did before he went to bed was throw the box of opals Janet gave him into the back of his closet.

***

Over the next few days, Tim abandoned his Jason-sitting duties to spent more spend quality time with his parents. It was difficult since his instincts were on high alert. But being with Jack and Janet was the lesser of two evils. When he *wasn't* near them, he was far more destructive than normal.

Alfred had caught him defacing statues twice, Dick had to yank his favorite sweater out of Tim's mouth, and Cass had to chase him out of the attic because he'd tried to lock her inside it. Half the

manor's furniture was covered in claw marks, and Tim had shattered a couple windows.

The frustrating part was that Tim didn't know why he was doing it. Everything just felt wrong, so he was trying to fix it. It wasn't his fault that the solution seemed to be breaking everything. Maybe it was another developmental milestone. That'd figure.

"Sad mom is leaving," Cass said after several days of destruction. "Cool motive, still murder."

She held up the smoldering wreck that'd been her Xbox and waved it under Tim's nose. He'd thrown a batarang at it when the loading screen took too long.

"I'm *not* sad," Tim said, rising to his full (unimpressive) height. "Don't be ridiculous, Cass."

He'd lived apart from his parents for most of his life and been perfectly fine. This was no different. Sure, it was . . . Nice . . . Having them so close, and Tim's emotions had been more intense since his adult teeth came in, but that was just coincidence.

"Teenager. Big feelings," Cass said, shaking the Xbox. "Human side, aggressive. Need learn control."

"Do not," Tim snapped. "And I'm *not* human, Cass. The dance camps are affecting your brain."

She shot him a dirty look and shooed him out of the attic. A few minutes later, Tim got similar treatment from Alfred, who had limited patience for whining. Dick was at work, Jason was either in Crime Alley or acting as Joanne's unofficial book-bouncer, and Babs was staying with her dad for a few days to sell the "nervous bride-to-be" act, so there was only one other person Tim could go to for hoard time.

"Champ, no," Bruce said, holding his work papers above his head. "I need these."

Tim lashed his tail in annoyance. It hit the window and cracked the pane. Bruce winced.

They were in Bruce's personal office. The man himself was at the desk, laptop out and quarterly reports highlighted. Tim was sprawled over every surface like a scaly pipe cleaner, wings splayed lazily across the floor for the perfect stretch. It was getting harder to open them all the way inside rooms this size, but at sixteen feet long (not including his tail) he was still small enough to be comfortable indoors. Tim figured he had another decade or two before he could only do partial transformations inside smaller rooms. For now, he'd enjoy being fun-sized.

"You can't keep breaking things," Bruce said. "Alfred will ground you."

Tim puffed smoke into Bruce's face and growled.

Bruce looked like he was debating taking up religion, just so he could ask a deity to smite him and end his suffering.

"This is enough, Tim," he said. "You need to stop moping. Go play outside. 'Touch grass,' or whatever it is you kids say."

Tim lifted his head off Bruce's lap, affronted. Excuse him, but what? This was hoard time! Tim would not be moved.

Bruce closed his laptop. "I know you're upset your folks are leaving, but don't take it out on us, or the manor. This is excessive, even for you."

Okay, the silent treatment wasn't cutting it. Tim needed to clear this misunderstanding up ASAP.

He shifted back into human form, got to his feet, and scowled his mother's scowl. "I'm not upset. Why does everyone keep saying that? I feel nothing. *Nothing,* and that's it. Stop projecting your species' silly feelings onto— *Bruce, put me down! "*

Tim squirmed as he was hoisted over Bruce's shoulder in a fireman's carry and hauled out of the office. He scrambled for purchase, hissing and spitting smoke as Bruce lugged him through the halls.

“We don’t have to talk about feelings,” Bruce said. “But you can at least distract yourself from them.”

“I’m not feeling anything!” Tim insisted.

Bruce reached a parlor on the first floor, and opened the French doors onto the lawn. Tim was tossed onto the grass before he could decide whether or not to transform and squish Bruce.

“Go play with your friends,” Bruce said, no-nonsense. “You can come back home when you’re less destructive.”

He closed the door, shook his head, and walked back into the depths of the manor.

Tim was feeling something now. *Betrayed.* This man had the *gall* to yeet Tim onto the grass like a football? Jail! Jail for ten thousand years!

“The joke’s on you, I was going to leave anyway!” Tim yelled, then spun on his heel and marched toward the woods.

He paused, eyes on Drake Manor. It’d be so easy to sneak over and dive bomb his mom . . . But there was a rankly, bubbly sensation in his chest when he thought about that. Never mind.

Tim shifted back into dragon shape and took to the sky. Gotham was overcast, but he had an innate sense of direction. Instead of home, he flew south. *Far* south. Right now, there was only one person he wanted to be with.

***

“What are you doing in my house?” Max Mercury said.

Tim looked up from where he was reorganizing the man’s fridge. “Looking for Bart.”

Max sighed. “Of course you are. He’s in New England, kid. Why didn’t you just text him?”

Tim paused his sassy comment, and remembered that yes, he did have a phone. Using it was an option, and definitely a better one than flying six hours to Alabama all on his own. Apparently, he’d been in a worse mood than he’d thought. Traveling by speedster didn’t even occur to him. Huh.

“I’ll go do that, I guess,” Tim said, edging out of the kitchen. “Yay, technology.”

Max watched him go, extra judgey, and Tim didn’t even blame him for it.

***

Tim loathed to admit it, but Bruce had a point. Tim was feeling better now that he was out of the house. Young Justice had a way of making him smile, even when he was twitchy with irritation.

At least, they usually could, but Tim was surrounded by evil traitors out to cause him harm. Either they’d purposefully agreed to be friends to lower his guard, or they’d been compromised by mind-altering substances.

“Can you repeat that,” Tim said, queasy.

“Yeah, sure,” Cassie said cheerfully. “School starts in a couple weeks, so we want to cap off the summer with one last team activity.”

Oh no, *school.* He’d forgotten about that. Evil, hateful Gotham Academy would be back in business, right along with Dick’s usual insanity. But that was something to freak out about later—*after* this.

“And you chose camping,” Tim said, sinking onto the ratty couch in Mount Justice. *“Camping.”*

Cassie and the others looked at each other, then at him. They looked so confused that Tim wouldn't be surprised if question marks manifested above their heads.

"Uh, yeah?" Anita said. "Is that okay?"

Tim laughed a panicked, traumatized laugh. "Oh yeah, it's perfectly fine until your dad forces you to fish in a canoe for six hours and forgets to bring bug spray. Or when your mom shoves you into the fire pit and Dad has to taser both of you to avoid another hospital trip. And did I mention no WiFi? It's torture!"

He'd thought that Constantine weirdo Bruce always complained about sealed the gateways to hell, so why was Tim still cursed with this? What cruel god did he piss off? Was there no mercy in this pitiable drudgery called life?

"Hey, Robin, it's okay, we can reschedule with another activity," Kon said worriedly. Cissie was mouthing 'taser?' behind him, and Greta was extra misty with concern.

Tim realized he was breathing very fast. Probably because he'd thought he was safe from the horrors of family camping trips now that Jack and Janet were leaving. What a fool he'd been. There were no safe spaces.

"Wait, maybe this can be a good thing?" Cissie said, giving Tim a supportive smile. "I mean, those things sound awful, but we can make new memories with you, Robin."

"What?" Tim said.

"It'll be like our sleepovers!" Bart added, latching onto Tim like a burr. "Except outside with lots of easy access wildlife, and more fire. I just found a place that sells marshmallows as big as baseballs. We can throw them into the campfire and watch them burn!"

"You're supposed to eat them," Anita said.

Bart squinted at her. “This must be another past VS future cultural difference. You aren’t supposed to eat marshmallows. They absorb toxins from the air, so they’re used as fuel.”

Kon narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but Tim thought that sounded fascinating. He was totally picking Bart’s brain over that later.

“What do you say, Rob?” Cissie said, Greta making a pleading face behind her. “Want to give it a shot?”

Tim weighed his options. One one hand, camping trips had been his personal purgatory growing up, but on the other . . . Tim had enjoyed living in the wild when he’d run away from Dance Camp, and this was his team. He could trust them. As long as there wasn’t another dragon around, it shouldn’t be terrible.

“ . . . Maybe it could be fun,” Tim said. “But I reserve the right to burn everything down if it goes badly.”

It was always good to have a contingency in place.

“Deal,” Cassie said, beaming. Everyone else echoed the sentiment, and agreed to help with the arson if it came to that.

Tim felt himself relax. He still wasn’t jazzed that Young Justice was *camping* , but friend-time made him feel fuzzy.

The others started making plans; who’d bring the tent, the snacks, reserve a campground, etc. Tim leaned back on the sofa, allowing himself a smile. It was hard to believe that in only a couple short months they’d gone from avoiding him to asking his hoard for bonding activities. Who’d have thunk it, communication had actually paid off.

***

“You’re going camping with your friends? Tim, that’s wonderful,” Jack gushed a couple days later. “I’m so proud of you.”

He dabbed his eyes, a second away from sobbing with joy. Tim looked away, visibly uncomfortable. He knew telling his folks was a mistake.

Tim, Jack, and Janet were trying to spend as much time together as (safely) possible before the Drakean exodus. Today, they were having lunch downtown. Public places practically guaranteed neither dragon would cause a scene. Tim still wanted to rip out his mother’s throat, but his pride stopped him; he would *not* be the one to ruin their Secrecy Streak. He’d never live it down. Plus, he didn’t want to get banned from another restaurant.

“It’s not a big deal. But, uh, it’s the same weekend you and mom are leaving Gotham, so I won’t be able to meet you at the airport,” Tim said. “Sorry about that.”

The Drakes were departing at midnight on Saturday, and Tim had been planning to say goodbye in public so it’d be less tempting to maul Janet. But, since he’d be with his friends, he’d have to say goodbye sooner.

Jack waved that detail away. “That’s alright, we’ll keep in touch. Go have fun with your friends. This is a big day for you.”

“Sure.”

Jack was always pushing for Tim to try more human things and learn to fit in with regular people, even though regular people didn’t *like* Tim. Janet had the same problem; humans with functional instincts knew not to get close to them, which left a very small pool of people for the shapeshifting dragons to associate with.

“Besides, now that I think about it, we’re busy that morning anyway,” Jack said, pulling up the calendar app on his phone. “Dick invited me to a PTA meeting for your super team.”

Tim blinked. “The what for the what?”

“PTA meeting,” Jack said. He waited until the waiter refilled everyone’s cup, then kept talking. “Apparently, That Blue Hurricane fellow is worried about a couple of your teammates’ home lives, so he had Dick help arrange a parent support ground for young vigilantes. I’m glad I can squeeze it in before we leave town.”

“Blue H—do you mean *Red Tornado?”* Tim said.

“Is that his name?” Jack said. “Well, I was close enough. Anyway, I RSVPed about a week ago. It’ll be nice to meet new people. Right dear?”

Janet crushed a walnut in her bare hands as she gave her husband an irritated scowl. Tim suspected it was getting harder for her to be non—violent as well. Her eyes kept slitting whenever she looked at him.

Jack's smile got gooier. Ew.

“Okay, cool,” Tim said, poking his salad, appetite gone. “That makes sense. Kind of.”

As in, not at all. This was the first time Tim was hearing about any of this. It was probably his fault for tuning Dick out so often, but in his defense, all the guy talked about was his fake-engagement with Babs and Tim's education, so it wasn't like he was missing much.

Seriously, a PTA meeting? School started in a week, and Dick would have all the meetings he'd ever want. Weirdo.

“Have fun, I guess,” Tim said. “I'll say goodbye the night before.”

“Sounds great, kiddo,” Jack said, beaming.

Tim slumped deeper into his chair and scowled, identical to his mother. He was still miffed Jack was leaving. Janet could vanish into the ether for all he cared (the mopey feeling he got when he thought about losing easy access to her was fake and easily ignored), but Jack was hoard. Tim hated not having him within grabbing distance.

“You sure you can't stay longer?” He said, poking at his meal.

Jack's face fell. “No. Believe me, Tim, I'm not happy about this either. But we'll be back soon, I promise.”

“Sure.”

Next year, maybe. This sucked.

Tim took a mournful bite of his lunch and bit through the silverware. His venom pooled in his mouth, melting the cheap metal completely. If he could get away with it, he'd pounce on Janet right now, defeat her, and hide his dad in the panic room at Wayne manor for the rest of his natural life. That way, Jack would never have to leave.

But even though it was really, *really* tempting, Tim knew losing Janet would break Jack's heart. So he stayed in his seat, resisting his violent urges, and tried to burn this moment with his parents into his heart, so that at least once they left, he'd have something from the summer to treasure.

Stupid instincts. They made this family thing so hard.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, I had the campout arc completely written, then decided it didn't fit the tone for the story at this point. So I've been reworking it during my spare time, but I don't have a lot of it these days. Thank you for your patience. :/

Your Marsh Has Been Mallowed

Chapter Summary

Jack has fun, Tim is betrayed, and Dick isn't paid enough for this.

Chapter Notes

Getting this edited was a big victory (though I probably should have been doing school instead lol).

Also! Imafluffyflyingsquirrel posted this awesome amazing fanart that you should TOTALLY check out. The vibes are immaculate, and I'm still fangirling over it!! XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Young Justice had agreed to meet in Mount Justice before zetaing to the campsite in order to remind their guardians what their return ETAs were and reassure them everything was in good hands.

Tim didn't see what the point of that was (the team was in his hands, and they were the best there were, so it was stupid for the parents to worry) but he was happy to hang out with Dick while everything was being set up, and hung off Nightwing's arm as they filed through the zeta tube, excited for a day of fun and whimsy with his besties.

They reappeared in Mount Justice. The space had been rearranged for the PTA meeting, and a dozen people were milling around in various stages of costume. Most of the team was fully dressed in their gear, but the parents were either in really bad disguises or dressed normally.

"Greets, peeps!" Tim said, unlatching himself from Dick once they'd both stabilized. "What's hanging?"

Kon glanced up from his phone and shrugged. "Not much. I can't wait to get out of here."

Oh yeah, Kon didn't have parents. Lucky guy. Tim wondered if anybody was going to bother showing up to represent him.

Dick squinted at the main table. "I spy parents. See you in a bit, Robin."

Tim quacked as his hair was ruffled, then tried to bite Dick. The man dodged and walked over to Red Tornado. Tim glowered as he smoothed his hair. Intimidation tactic failed.

He glanced around the room, taking track of his friends. Cissie and Anita were chatting by the door. Greta was hiding in mist form, hiding in a bottle Cissie was holding since the ghost girl was technically an escaped science experiment that Anita's dad was trying to track down. That was one showdown nobody wanted to happen today.

Cassie was next to Bart. Her hair was cut in a fresh pixie-cut, and she had a pair of cowboy boots Tim suspected she'd gotten at the rodeo back in June. Bart was engrossed with explaining how his hand-held video game worked, and his form was a blur of static as he kept forgetting to talk in regular time.

The only one missing was Slobo, but that wasn't a surprise. He was always dipping on activities—usually because they didn't involve enough fighting—and wanted to stay a hundred square miles away from anyone parental shaped. An alien after Tim's own heart.

The parents were clustered around a circular table Red Tornado had moved into the common area (ousting the bean bags to the depths of storage; an unforgivable crime). The Drakes weren't there yet, but everyone else had already arrived. Tim didn't know why his folks was running late, but he had his suspicions. Janet hated socializing *and* parenting. She was probably trying to stall.

Nightwing stood by the potluck with his arms crossed, speaking in short sentences to Cissie's mom. Mrs. King-Jones looked eerily like her daughter, except twenty years older with crow's feet and a chain smoker's voice. From everything Tim had heard, she was persona no bueno.

Tim snubbed his nose at her and eyed Wondergirl's parental unit—a tall, busy-business woman with brown hair, glasses, and oddly familiar features . . . Wait a minute.

Recognition dawned, too little too late.

Tim sidled up to Cassie, nudging her in the ribs so he could hiss in her ear. “You never told me your mom was an archaeologist.”

Cassie blinked. “You already know all our IDs. I figured you already knew.”

Tim shrugged. “Well, yes, but it hadn’t really registered.”

When he’d stalked the team he’d been more interested in learning where Young Justice’s new HQ was. He hadn’t focused on petty details like what their families did for a living. Plus, Cassie’s mom had a steady job and was a good parent, so she faded into the background. Woe unto Tim, however. This was a major miscalculation.

“This isn’t good,” Tim said, eying Ms. Sandsmark. “This *really* isn’t good.”

“Why?” Cassie asked.

Tim hummed, trying to find the best way to explain why having multiple archaeologists in the same room was a recipe for disaster. Either they nerded out together or nitpicked and declared blood feuds. Historical societies were wild, and Tim wanted no part of them. He put up with enough of this at home when Jack brought up his lameo college friends.

Even worse was that Tim was pretty sure Ms. Sandsmark knew the Drakes. Which meant she knew *Jack.* Which meant as soon as Tim’s parents walked through that door he could kiss his secret identity goodbye.

Tim squawked as someone flung their arm around his shoulders and reeled him in for a hug.

“Dick,” Tim said, squirming for air. “Warn a guy.”

He hadn’t even seen his bendy human wander over.

“Sorry, buddy,” Dick said, unapologetic. “Just wanted to check in. Has your dad texted you about when he’ll make it?”

“Nah,” Tim said. “Maybe they won’t come? They have better things to do than worry about me.”

Like, literally anything. Tim could take care of himself just fine. This PTA thing was insulting.

“Don’t say that, Robin,” Cissie said. “You should always be their priority.”

The rest of the team nodded along to her.

“Uh, okay?” Tim said, a bit confused. “Thanks, but agree to disagree.”

Tim could look after himself. Parents should be reserved for people who actually needed them.

Dick sighed, slumping against Tim. “Not this again.”

Why did he sound so resigned?

Young Justice looked ready to say something else, but the zeta tube interrupted them as it pinged.

[Recognized, Dad and Best Mom.]

The Drakes appeared in a flash of light. Jack looked frazzled, but Janet Drake was grace personified. She stood in the teleporter chamber, dressed in a tailored pinstripe suit with her hair tied in an artful bun. Her nails were a vivid red, and her eyes scanned the room with a predatory focus until they landed on Tim.

"Child of mine," she purred. "How good to see you again."

“Hey Mom,” Tim said. His hackles were raising and he was already fighting the instinctive urge to pounce, but he was glad he got to see her and Jack (well, mostly Jack) one last time before they left the country. “Thanks for dropping by.”

Janet did not smile (she said it belittled her dignity) but her eyes had a sharp gleam that pleased Tim. This PTA business was stupid, but if Janet was here it’d go smoothly. What better model for supreme motherhood was there than her? Janet could show these humans the light that was sink-or-swim child abandonment, and make all future meetings pointless.

“So it begins,” Dick muttered, then stepped in front of Tim. “Mrs. Drake, so good to see you again.”

Nightwing’s fingers twitched toward his batons. How adorable. Hopefully, someday he’d realize he didn’t have to stop Tim and Janet from mauling each other whenever they met in person. They knew how to behave in public . . . Although, duking it out in a superhero base sounded tempting. Tim could probably convince his team to join his side.

“Stop calling me that. It’s Janet,” Janet stepped out of the zeta tube, smoothing her suit coat with a manicured hand. “And it isn’t.”

“Hey, Nightwing,” Jack said, smiling from behind Janet. She always took point when entering a new room. “Good to see you, old boy. Is that a new mask?”

Dick shrugged. “Sort of. I’m experimenting with different latex mixtures. Anyway, I’m glad you could make—”

“*Janet?”*

Everyone blinked. Ms. Sandsmark was staring at Tim’s mom in bewilderment. Oh yeah, archaeologist. Looked like Tim had been on the money. Cassie’ mom and his parents were acquainted. That meant small talk. How horrid.

“Who are you?” Janet said.

Jack elbowed her. “That’s Helena, darling. We’ve donated to her museum several times.”

“Oh.” Janet said, bored. Tim felt for her. If she’d wanted to remember those details, she would’ve.

Jack marched over and shook Mrs. Sandsmark’s hand, babbling that it was a delight to see her there. He hadn’t known she was one of his son’s friend’s parents. What a small world, etc etc. She gave him a dead-fish handshake, mouth dropped far enough to catch flies.

Tim fished a batarang out of his belt and aimed it at his mother. Dick grabbed it out of the air and tucked it into his own suit, then gave Tim a warning glare. Killjoy.

“I always thought your travel schedules were weird, but if your son is Robin, then it explains everything,” Cassie’s mom said.

“It does?” Janet said blandly.

“Of course!” Mrs. Sandsmark said. “You have super connections. Maybe even a modified jet, just like—Oh God.” Her eyes landed on Jack. “Are you *Batman?”*

Tim stopped trying to steal the batarang back from Dick. He *couldn’t* have heart that correctly. Yet a glance around the room showed everybody else having the same collective (incorrect) epiphany. Tim’s teammates looked especially horrified. Tim heard Cissie whisper “Oh God, the *vase, ”* to Anita.

There were no words to describe what Dick’s face did at that moment. Tim wished he’d had his camera, but would have to settle for downloading the base’s security footage later.

As for Jack and Janet, Tim’s mom looked exasperated. She only liked one silly human; other people’s idiocy drove her mad. Jack, on the other hand, looked like a blind man that’d seen the sun for the first time. A big smile crept up his face, and Tim saw a gleam in his eye that was usually only in his own reflection. Huh, so that’s where he’d gotten it.

“Please, Helena, don’t be so formal,” Jack said, putting a hand over his heart. “My friends call me Batty.”

“Oh God,” Dick said, face in his hand.

Tim held back a snicker and wondered how long it’d take Cassie’s mom to realize Jack and Janet’s travel dates were so out of whack that it was physically impossible for them to match up with the regular Batman sightings in Gotham.

He wanted to stay longer and see the beautiful train wreck this meeting would be, but Tim made the mistake of inhaling too deep. He snapped his teeth together when he got a mouthful of Janet’s scent. As always, she was a weird mix of hostile predator and home. It made him want to rip her to shreds, just like he did to the couches in Alfred’s favorite parlor.

He eyed Dick’s escrima sticks. If he tried to murder his mom, he’d get zapped. He could sense it. Damn it.

“Come, my special stars,” Tim said, grabbing Impulse and Superboy. “We must depart from her. Let’s blow this Popsicle stand to smithereens.”

“Yes, bombs!” Bart said in delight.

“No bombs!” Mex Mercury said from across the room.

Bart pouted, dragging his feet while Tim collected the rest of his friends for their adventure. It was a much quieter group than he’d expected. Bart was still spitting smoke (no doubt thinking violent thoughts since he’d been denied explosives), Kon was staring at Tim’s mom, and the girls were whispering among themselves.

“Come on guys,” Tim said impatiently, “are we camping or what?”

“Uh yeah,” Cassie said, then elbowed him. “Why didn’t tell me you were Tim *Drake?* My family literally knows yours!”

“You’ve been to my house,” Tim reminded her, rubbing his ribs. Ow. “I thought it was obvious.”

He didn’t mention that he hadn’t made the connection himself. That didn’t seem relevant.

“Obv—Whatever, we have to hang out now, understand?” Cassie said. “I need to vent about museum people, and you’re the only one who gets it.”

Tim perked up. He didn’t get to whine about gallery displays or excavations nearly enough. Cassie was moving up the friend ladder.

“Bye Mom, Dad!” Tim yelled as his team shuffled into the zeta. “See you next year, maybe.”

“If only we should be so unlucky,” Janet muttered while Jack waved enthusiastically at Tim.

The teleported activated, and he bid the PTA meeting adieu.

***

"Dude, your mom is hot as sin," Kon said as they all set up the tent.

"Kon, seriously?" Cissie groaned.

"What? We were all thinking it,” the super said. “Definitely a ten."

The girls rolled their eyes, but Tim was glad Kon understood Janet’s amazingness.

"She’s the best, but mere numbers can't capture her epicness," Tim said. "Dad definitely married up."

He also married weird, but that was a different conversation. Janet was not a person for the faint of heart. Many a knight in shining armor would have retired rather than face her on the battlefield.

“You really seem to like her. I’m jealous,” Cissie said, pounding a tent stake into the ground. “My mom is the worst.”

“Yeah, that’s rough,” Anita said as she got out the s’mores ingredients. “Aw, man. We forgot to bring marshmallows.”

“I’ll get them!” Bart said, and vanished in a fizz of light. Tim shut his eyes so he wouldn’t pounce on the sparks left behind.

Nobody batted an eye at the speedster’s Houdini act. Anita kept pulling Graham crackers out of the back, and went back to talking to Cissie. “You mentioned the state gave her visitation rights recently. How’re they going?”

Cissie hammered the stake in with more force than necessary. “How do you think? I can’t stand her. You’re lucky you have a good mom, Rob.”

Cassie, arguably the only one with a normal parent (Max was an adopted uncle and didn’t count) coughed awkwardly on the sidelines.

“Thanks,” Tim said. “It’s too bad I can’t see her more often.”

“Why?” Kon dropped some logs into the fire pit and dusted off his hands. “Do your folks travel a lot?”

Tim fitted a tent pole into the canvas, muscle memory making the set up easy. “Yeah, but I’m not supposed to get within a hundred feet of her even when she’s in town. Batman and Nightwing are still mad about the last time she put me in the hospital.”

Tim wedged the pole into the stake’s loop. He stepped back and appraised his handiwork. Not bad for not having done this in a couple years. He glanced up and saw everyone was staring at him. “What?”

“She put you in the hospital?” Cassie said in a very high voice.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t a big deal,” Tim said. “I only needed, like, fourteen stitches that time, and Dad’s favorite surgeon was in town so I got the scars taken care of right away. I’m pretty sure they’re a meta, because there’s literally no trace, see?”

Tim gestured to his face, which looked flawless. Jack’s doctors were worth every penny. Bruce had the guy on retainer now.

“*That time?”* Cissie parroted, not nearly impressed enough about Tim’s lack of scars.

“Yeah, didn’t even have any broken bones, which was awesome,” Tim said proudly. “She has such great self-control.”

None of Young Justice looked impressed by that either. Tough crowd. Although their pinched faces were really familiar. Tim felt like he’d seen these reactions before.

. . . Wait a minute.

“Oh, sorry! I’m not being abused. You don’t need to freak out,” Tim said, hating that this was even a misunderstanding he had to dispel. Of all the leaps in logic, this was one just ridiculous. “That’s just how Mom and I roll. We’re really into . . . sparring.”

Tackling each other and trying to bite their throats out counted as sparring, right? Just with less rules and a different number of limbs. It was a totally normal hobby, even for humans.

“Right,” Greta said rubbing her temple. Her hand went through her head. “Sure.”

“We’re really good at it,” Tim said, remembering his childhood with fondness. “I almost bit her arm off when I was a kid.”

Good times. Forget camping, death-matches were the best way to bring a family together. If only Jack would learn.

“No wonder you are the way you are,” Anita said dryly. “It’s genetic.”

Tim grinned (no teeth) and put his hands on his hips. “Darn right it is.”

He was going to wax poetic about some of their more destructive fights when Bart reappeared and almost tripped into the fire pit. Tim grabbed him by the scruff and yanked him up before he went down, but a few s’more ingredients went flying.

“Sorry about that!” Bart said cheerfully, face barely visible over bags of Staypuff marshmallows. “Who wants to incinerate some gelatin?”

The conversation was shelved. Tim couldn’t be more grateful. He’d eaten earlier, but there was *always* room for dessert.

***

Tim didn’t have experience with fellow teens, aside from terrorizing his classmates, and this campout was a fun way to get a taste of classic human bonding activities.

Funnily enough, Tim wasn’t the only person on the team who didn’t have traditional life experiences. Kon, Bart, and Greta were also raring to experience the novelty of a normal bonfire.

So far, they’d eaten/burned an entire case of hotdogs and a party-sized case of Starbursts. Several hunters had also been terrorized by the team, and Bart had dismantled the emergency radio for fun. He still hadn’t figured out how to put it together again, but Tim knew he’d get it by the end of the night. Bart was really smart, just easily distracted, like he was now.

“When are we going to eat the marshmallows?” Bart said, shaking the bag of giant ones he brought. “I hunger for the fluff.”

“I thought you couldn’t eat them,” Cissie said as she refletched an arrow. She was always doing that. She could use a new hobby.

“What?” Bart cocked his head. “Why wouldn’t I eat marshmallows?”

Tim also wanted to know that. Just because they were made of cow bones didn’t mean they were uneatable. Though it was weird they didn’t crunch, or have marrow, or taste like beef.

“Marshmallows are a staple food in the future,” Bart continued. “They’re like what rice is to people in the past.”

Tim nodded, filing that fact away, then frowned. Something about that sentence was odd.

Kon burst to his feet. “I knew it!”

Tim squeaked and dropped his starburst/hotdog kebab into the fire. Cissie and Cassie’s skewers also took a plunge and got covered in ash.

“You pathological liar,” Kon said, pointing an accusing finger at Bart. “I knew your future stories were wack. You’ve been lying your ass off about the thirty-first century for *months.”*

He was what now?

“I could tell something was off,” Kon continued. “Dystopian futures are one thing, but fictionalizing the use for marshmallows crosses a line. You may have been able to fool Robin, you can’t get that crap past me.”

Tim and the girls looked back and forth between Kon and Bart. Superboy was the picture of righteous fury, but Bart—Bart broke into a *grin,* then cackled.

“Surprise!” The speedster said, like a canary that’d eaten a cat.

Tim’s jaw dropped. “You *lied* to me?”

Bart nodded, hopping in delight.

“*Me?”* Tim said, aghast. “Your brother from another mother? Where’s the trust?”

Heck, screw trust. Where was the loyalty to his dragon?

“At your mom’s house,” Bart said, sticking his tongue out.

The *betrayal.* Only Tim should be allowed to gaslight his friends for fun.

“Get him!” Cassie yelled, pointing her skewer at the speedster.

“Justice!” Kon yelled, lunging forward.

Bart cackled again and vanished in a splash of red lightning.

“He went into the woods,” Greta said, gesturing to the treeline. “Hurry, we can still catch him.”

They all grabbed their skewers, a bag of marshmallows, and a rope, and set out after him.

It took half an hour of running through the woods, pincering Bart, until they tripped him with the rope and put him in a cone of shame (a party hat they’d taken the plastic streamers off of) to pay for his crimes. Bart, unsurprisingly, was unrepentant.

“A good joke is a good joke,” Bart said. “I make a good sleeper agent.”

“Shame!” Cassie said, drawing a frowny face on the cone hat. “Shame!”

Everyone else drew an emoji of their choice on the hat, equally minorly annoyed.

Tim wanted to be madder than he was, but Bart’s cackles were catching, and it was impressive that he’d kept the con going for so long. Apparently, it’d started out as an accident when Max misunderstood Bart when he mentioned stuff from the video games he grew up in, but it’s snowballed into Bart saying increasingly unhinged stuff about his time period just to see if people caught on. Which, no one ever did.

Frankly, Tim was a little embarrassed he hadn’t, but he tended to take things his hoard said at face value. Why would they ever lie to him? It saved time not to doubt them.

“Like I said,” Kon said once everyone was back at the campfire. “You can fool everyone else, Imp, but you can’t fool Detective Superboy.”

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After a few minutes, Bart got bored staying inside the dirt circle of punishment they drew around him, so the team called off his purgatory and started playing games. Party games, which Tim had never actually played. He had a personal policy of avoiding school events, sleepovers, and all get togethers his classmates did, so this was uncharted territory.

“Truth of dare, Rob?”

“Uh, truth.”

He got dared to take off his mask, but the joke was on them, Tim had accidentally worn two, so they didn’t get to see his eyes (and a good thing too. Tim was having trouble keeping the pupils human-shaped tonight. He blamed all the sugar). This game was pretty fun.

Even funner was daring Bart to be quiet for an entire minute. He was still working on several turns later, bless his heart.

After they were done torturing each other that way, the girls decided to do a test of courage. Greta, the ghost, was the most apprehensive, which Tim found ironic. She could open portals to the land of the dead, but somehow spooky things still made her nervous. He wished she was solid so he could open up her head and get a look at how her brain was wired.

Tim thought about joining them, but he'd eaten three bags of marshmallows and was working his way through a fourth, so he passed. He, Bart, and Kon waved the girls goodbye, and volunteered to watch the fire while they were gone, which was code for eating the rest of the snacks.

After fifteen minutes of munching, Bart got bored.

"I'm going to go to Tokyo and buy Godzilla merch," he said. "Don't tell Max. He said I'm not allowed to have any more, but he's wrong. I don't have a problem. I can quit as soon as I have the limited edition collectible. Do you guys want me to bring back snacks?"

"Sure," Tim said, knowing that Bart would eat the food on the run back and forget to share.

"I'll pass," Kon said, no doubt thinking the same thing.

Tim's speedster vanished in a blur of red static, leaving Tim and Kon alone. The fire crackled between them. Tim wondered if there was anything flammable they could throw into it.

"Sooo," Kon said, jostling Tim out of his thoughts. "What's it like having a family?"

"Pretty good, I guess," Tim said. "We fight a lot, but it's nothing personal. That's just a thing people do sometimes. Why?"

Kon shrugged and leaned back. He had his feet crossed casually, but Tim spotted some tension in his neck. “No reason. Just, um. You know how I’m a Luthor clone?”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

Kon ran a hand through his hair. “He, um, reached out a couple months ago. Said he wanted to give being a dad a shot.”

Tim raised an eyebrow. Then the other one for good measure. “Uh huh. Right.”

Kon nodded feverishly. “I know. It was hella weird. I let Supes know so he could keep an eye on the guy. Turns out there was a plan to implant a chip in my brain to make me his slave.”

Tim relaxed. “Oh! That makes sense. I was really confused for a second.”

Lex Luthor acting parental was like Doomsday opening a daycare. It just didn’t happen.

“Welcome to my world,” Kon said. “I thought I’d stepped into the Twilight Zone. It was kind of a relief that he was insincere. . . But I keep thinking about it, even though I know it was a lie. Is that weird?”

Tim tossed a rock into the fire. A scattering of sparks exploded into the air. “You should probably ask Cassie that. I’m not a good basis for normal.”

Tim was self-aware enough to know he was *not* the person to ask about familial yearning. Or anything human related, honestly. He didn’t get feeling like those, except for with Jack, but that was only because he was hoard. It was different, no matter what the Waynes said.

“You’re smart though,” Kon said, tucking his knees against his chest. “Like, scary smart. You hacked into our devices to many times, tracked down those rodeo goons, and totally revamped our supercomputer. I’ve always thought that was kind of . . . Cool.”

Tim stared at his buddy, duck-footed and bewildered. Kon remembered all the stuff he did?

“It’s nothing special,” Tim said. “I do that for Batman all the time. I got the job because I stalked him and Nightwing a bunch, so it’s more of a hobby than anything else.” He turned back to the fire, pretending the heat on his cheeks was from the flames. “But, uh, thanks . . . I think you’re kind of cool too.”

Kon was cocky and vain, but he was also funny, had super strength, and was loyal to his friends. He may have been a bit of a moron in certain areas, but Tim liked that quality in his humans. The sillier they were, the more endearing he found them. It was a preference he’d inherited from his mother.

“Families are complicated,” Tim said, thinking about Janet. “I don’t think there’s anything bad about wanting one. Just, they’re not as perfect as people pretend they are. That’d mean people are perfect, and that just doesn’t happen.”

Families were messy, even when they were good. That’s what made them so precious when they worked out. At least, that’s how Tim felt. But maybe he wasn’t the best person to ask; after all, his parents were pretty great.

“Do you think I’ll ever have a family?” Kon asked. He looked at the sky. “Some days, I feel more like Peter Pan or Pinnochio than a real person. I don’t age, I was born in a vat, my bio dads are either insane billionaries or awkward Kansian reporters . . . To quote Bart, my whole situation is mode.”

Tim decided the emotions had gone on long enough. The woods were starting to look like an easy escape. But . . . Kon had never opened up to him before before. Tim didn’t want to let him down.

He threw a starburst at the guy, hitting him square in the nose.

“You’ve got us,” Tim said. “So don’t worry, Pinnochio, you can just be yourself. We’re not going anywhere.”

It didn’t matter if Kon was stuck at sixteen forever. Tim wasn’t going to die for several centuries at least, so it changed nothing. As for the others, Tim wasn’t thinking about their mortality. If he did,

he'd have a panic attack, so in his mind they were immortal too and everything was fine.

"Thanks, Rob," Kon said. His smile as as bright as the sun at noon. "I'll hold you to that."

Tim smiled back, hiding his teeth, and decided now was as good a time as any to classify Superboy an official part of the hoard. That made him and Bart the official ones in Young Justice, though the others would join it too, given a bit more time.

"You'd better," Tim said. "After all the work I put into stalking you? You'll never get away from me."

Kon laughed, and the rest of their alone time passed in easy chatter until Bart came back with a Hastune Miku wig and no Godzilla figurines. Ten minutes later, the girls crashed back into camp, screaming about demons and ghosts. Greta was especially spooked.

"But you *are* a ghost," Tim said. "Are you sure the others didn't just spot you?"

Greta flung a wad of mist into his face. "Other ghosts are still scary, Rob!"

"Alright, yeesh," Tim said, spitting out the fog.

The rest of the night was spent searching the woods for the spirit (they found nothing), prank calling their mentors, and daring each other to do stupid stuff. By the time they called it in, everybody was so exhausted they didn't even fight over the sleeping bags.

"Still can't believe you lied to me about the future," he heard Kon grumble at Bart. "I thought it was totally Mad Max."

"It kind of is," Bart said. "I didn't lie about *everything."*

"Oh yeah? What was true?" Kon asked.

“I dunno. I forgot the stuff I said.”

“Bart!”

There was a loud thump, like a pillow was thrown at somebody via super strength. Bart cackled as he threw something back at the super, and a pillow fight started in full swing.

Tim curled up in his corner of the tent with a smile on his face, too sleepy to participate. He couldn’t wait to tell Jack about tonight; it was the best camping trip he’d ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Lmao, I’ve been laughing to myself whenever Bart appears onscreen, because his “future lies” have been happening since I introduced him. Tim just never questioned anything he was told about the 31st century. What a gullible murder lizard. But how apocalyptic is the future, really? Only Bart knows. ;)

Meanwhile, at Mt. Justice:

Red Tornado: We are gathered here today to talk about some alarming comments I received about some of the team’s home lives.
Cissie’s Mom: I didn’t do anything!
Red Tornado: I didn’t say you did. In fact, I’m more concerned about Robin.
Janet: Why? Out of all your pet projects, he’s the only one developing properly. Insisting your hatchlings stay in family units at this point is ridiculous. No wonder they are burning cities down. We stopped babying Timothy as soon as possible, and he’s better for it.
Cassie’s mom: …Excuse me?
Janet: Clearly, none of you know how to be parents. We simply gave him space to grow up, then farmed him out to the neighbors when they wanted to spoil him. I would have liked to abandon him as in infant, but Jack wouldn’t let me.
Cassie’s mom: EXCUSE ME?
Jack: . . . It’s really not as bad as it sounds.
Dick: *sigh* I wish I’d stayed home.

Originally, in my drafts, Tim asked Janet to come alone, so she locked Jack in the closet at Drake manor and terrorized the PTA meeting by herself while Dick ran damage control. (Tim was getting back at Dick for something petty). However, as fun as that was, I couldn't see her leaving her husband alone that long, so instead you get the Jack Batman conspiracy, and Janet being her charming self. 😊

Growing Pains

Chapter Summary

Tim does not have a good time, and for once it isn't even his fault!

Chapter Notes

Was going to try and post a really long chapter, then realized that it'd be forever before I got it all ready, so it got split in half (a common theme in my work). Enjoy part one of the penultimate chapter before a big YJ arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Coming home from the camping trip was like popping a bubble and getting soap in his mouth. Tim was not a fan. For one thing, his parents were gone. Technically, that was a plus since Gotham was Janet-free again, but Tim missed having lunch with his dad. Jack never judged his eating habits or got concerned when Tim stopped eating for days or weeks at a time. (Alfred still a bit suspicious of his random lack of appetite, even after Tim had explained the whole crocodile metabolism thing. The butler's need to feed everyone he cared about could not be quelled.)

Another downside of being back in civilization was school. The hateful learning facility started back up, and was now taking up all of Tim's glorious free time. Long gone were the days when he could vanish into Gotham's South side for an afternoon of maintaining his bone shrines. No, now he had to study and show up for gym.

"I want to drop out," Tim said, lying prone by the computer in the Batcave. "I'd be a way better Robin if I did. Bruce, let me be a house dragon."

Bruce reached down and scratched his head. "Robin shouldn't get in the way of your civilian life. Stay strong, champ."

Tim hissed rolled into a better moping position. Dick had promised to watch the entire Saw franchise with Tim if he didn't get any absences in September, but that was a high bar to pass. The urge to ditch was growing stronger by the day.

Above him, Bruce made a confused noise. Tim peeked over and saw Bruce had gotten another email from Cassie's mom asking Batman to investigate a donor she suspected was smuggling ancient Greek swords.

"Tim, why does Wondergirl's mother have my work email?" Bruce asked.

Tim blinked, letting his eyes flop between snake slits and human irises. It felt good, like stretching a muscle. "I dunno. Maybe she got it from the PTA meeting, or just guessed it."

"Hrn."

"Come on B, it's not like it's hard," Tim said, rolling his eyes. Batman@TheDarkKnight.com was so basic. He was surprised Bruce wasn't on every spam email list. A monkey could've figured it out.

Tim went back to mourning his free time, then winced as he tried to relax. He hadn't done anything crazy last night, but his body was unusually sore. It felt like someone had taken a meat tenderizer to his back. Yuck. Oh well, it probably wasn't a big deal.

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Three days later, Tim slumped against the doorway to the kitchen. "Alfie, can I stay home today?"

Alfred didn't look over as he pulled a skillet out of the oven. The bacony smell of breakfast wafted through the air. "School is mandatory, young master. Unless you have a good reason, I'm afraid you can't get out of it."

"OK, cool," Tim said, rubbing his side. Was pain a good excuse? It should be. But Tim still wasn't sure *why* he was hurting, so it probably wouldn't count.

Alfred served him a plate of baked eggs and kale with bacon bits. There was a smorgasbord of Tim-friendly toppings on the side. It looked disgusting. Tim nudged his plate away and face-planted against the island.

“Master Tim, are you quite alright?” Alfred asked, resting a hand on Tim’s back.

“No,” Tim said, voice muffled by the counter. “I don’t feel so good.”

Alfred’s grip tightened on Tim’s shoulder. “I see. Let’s get you looked after, then.”

A short trip to the Batcave later, and Tim was laid up on one of the cots, hating his life. He’d felt mostly fine when he got out of bed, but getting down the stairs had left him shaky and sore. Everything from his bones to his toes *throbbed.*

“I think I’m dying,” Tim moaned.

Alfred sat beside him and rubbed circles on his back. It felt like heaven.

“You don’t have a fever,” Alfred said, frowning at a thermometer. “Are you quite sure your skin isn’t itching?”

“Not a molt,” Tim muttered. Molts were worse than this. *Way* worse. But this sucked too.

“We’ll just have to wait it out, I suppose,” Alfred said. “I will get you some painkillers. If this gets worse you will inform me immediately, understand?”

“Kay,” Tim said, putting a pillow over his head.

“Good,” Alfred said, patting Tim’s back. “And young master?”

“What, Alfie?” Tim groaned.

“Thank you for letting me know you were unwell,” Alfred said. “I’ll make sure to cook your favorite meal tonight.”

Tim squinted at him, too tired for whatever mind games the butler was playing. “Thanks?”

Alfred smiled and gave him two ice packs and a bottle of painkillers before going to call Bruce’s office. Tim pulled a blanket over himself and hoped unconsciousness would claim him soon. He couldn’t even be happy about missing school. This was officially the worst.

***

Tim was laid up in bed the rest of the week. He tried transforming to get more comfortable, but his dragon form felt like it’d fallen into a vat of fire ants. Every muscle in his serpentine body was on strike. Staying human was the lesser of two evils.

“Poor baby dragon,” Cass said when she tried to feed him soup. “Growing up hard.”

He whacked the spoon out of her hand, still refusing to eat. It’d been five days since his last meal, but his appetite still hadn’t come back. Luckily, Tim could go much longer before he needed to eat, but it was making him grumpy.

Cass rolled her eyes and ate the soup instead. They spent the rest of the day watching nature documentaries and reading pop-up books for Cass’ reading practice. She was the best person to play nursemaid for him since she mostly kept to herself. The rest of the Waynes were smothering, to Tim’s abject humiliation. It irked him to be the one taken care of. Some dragon he was. Janet would die of embarrassment if she could see him now. Good thing she and Jack were spending a week in Uruguay to learn Guarani and didn’t have reliable WiFi.

To escape the horror of being dependent on his hoard, Tim texted Tam and told her he was sick, and not just in the head like she thought. She told him putting vapo-rub on his chest and sleeping with socks on would help, but all that did was make Tim wake up at 3 AM and hallucinate that he’d met God, so he wasn’t going to listen to her sketchy folk-cures again.

After a week of feeling like he'd been run over by a steamroller, Tim finally got his strength and appetite back. He ate a few chickens and an entire gallon of red Koolaid, and declared himself right as rain. (five minutes later, he threw up most of the Koolaid, but he *was* better. He could feel it in his achy, stretchy bones.)

After a couple more days taking it easy, Tim tentatively transformed and sighed with relief when he felt normal. Well, normalish. Closer inspection revealed why he'd been so miserable; his dragon form was four feet longer than it had been a week ago. Hell yeah. The pain was *so* worth it.

"A growth spurt? Really?" Jason said when he stopped by the Batcave that afternoon. "That was it?"

"Don't minimize my suffering," Tim said, pinwheeling his arms to get the kinks out. He was doing an extra-thorough pre-patrol workout. Being in bed for so long had made him stiff. "You try getting twenty-five percent bigger in a week and see how *you* feel. Not all of us get Lazarus water to ease the process."

Jason winced. "Point taken."

Tim went back to stretching, wincing at the strain. His human form hadn't grown an inch, but it still ached. Tim wasn't sure how to feel about that. He liked one side of himself being small since his dragon form was much larger, but Bruce's delayed development theory was getting more credence, which meant the "baby dragon" jokes would keep going in full swing. Such was the price he paid for being able to fit into air vents.

"You sure you should be back on the field so soon?" Jason said. "You still seem shaky."

"If I'm healthy enough to go to school, I'm healthy enough to be Robin," Tim said. "That's the deal. Besides, I'm mostly going to hang out with Babs."

She'd promised to do a coding challenge with him tonight, and Tim was ecstatic. He hadn't been spending as much time with her since her fake engagement, and the lack of hoard time with his computer human was making him wilt like a hothouse flower in January.

“Good,” Jason said. “I’m glad she’s looking out for you.”

Tim opened his mouth to remind Jason that *he* was taking care of *her*, but the zombie was already walking away, probably to raid the library for more books.

***

“Do I *have* to go?” Tim whined the next day.

“You know the rules,” Alfred said, ushering him to the front door. “If you’re well enough for vigilantism, you’re well enough for school.”

Tim grumbled all the way to the car, then down the driveway as Dick drove him to Gotham Academy (Tim still wasn’t trusted to drive himself, since he’d almost certainly ditch). How dare his hoard use his own words against him.

Once he got to Gotham Academy, he flung himself into his homeroom seat and glared out the window. If the world was a kinder place, he’d evolve psychic powers like the girl in that children’s book Jason wouldn’t shut up about, and use his abilities to torment the faculty. Instead, he was doomed to suffer.

He started to growl, just under the register human’s could audibly perceive. His classmates shuddered, avoiding eye contact.

It was going to be a long day.

***

Three weeks after the camp out and five days after Tim had recovered from his growth spurt from Hell, Greta ambushed Tim in Mt. Justice. She had a habit of phasing through walls when she wanted to talk to people, so Tim had almost spit out his coffee. He was used to hearing people approach, but Greta one of the few people able to truly catch him off guard.

It didn't help that Tim was also sleep-deprived and exhausted. Young Justice was having *tons* of drama right now, and Tim had volunteered to compile some of the mission reports since nobody else was. He had a lot of fun (he wasn't *quite* hoarding the documents, but the line was blurry with digital things) but the price was tiredness, and being very easy to sneak up on—as seen by Greta's stealth mode.

After clearing his airways, Tim nodded along to her apology and asked what she needed.

"Do you want to go out together on Halloween?" she said, floating next to him.

"Halloween's like, a month away," Tim said, cocking his head to the side. It was the end of September, which wasn't spooky season at all. "Is there some kind of event happening?"

"No," Greta said, flickering extra transparent. That was usually an emotional response to something, though Tim didn't know why she'd be having one now. "It's just, well, it's good to plan ahead! You're not busy, are you?"

She flickered again. Light mist seeped out of her clothes, smelling like the dead.

"Not really," Tim said, wiping frappuccino off his chin.

Greta clapped her hands. "So, you'll come?"

"Yeah, sure," Tim said. "We can make it a team thing—"

No!" Greta waved her hands. A chill cut through the air. Tim got goosebumps. "Um, can it just be the two of us?"

Tim looked from her to the door, weighing his options. It'd be more fun with the whole group, but he and Greta rarely did things on their own. It'd be a good change of pace.

“Okay, sure,” he said. “What’s the plan?”

Her delighted smile was so bright Tim wished he’d brought sunglasses.

Chapter End Notes

Alfred *constantly*: Thank you for communicating with me, master Tim. Here is a treat.
Tim: *confused/happy dragon noises*

Bruce: You never give me treats.
Alfred: You never communicate with me. Start doing so, and perhaps I'll bake some lemon squares.
Bruce: ...I thought the Pavlov approach was only for Tim.
Alfred: It is, but if you don't want to dessert--
Bruce: I never said that.

Secret Confessions

Chapter Summary

Greta has some things to tell Tim. A lot of things. Alarming things. Things he isn't qualified to have conversations about, and would really rather not talk about ever.

Chapter Notes

Apologies if this is a little rough, I've been fighting a war with spellcheck and am losing.

You know school is intense when I post four chapters of various fics within a couple of days of each other. This isn't procrastination at all. I'm *fine.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim had forgotten to celebrate Halloween last year because to the whole Red Hood debacle, so this time he put extra effort into his costume. Today was a day to bewilder and terrify passerby with dress-up, and he wasn't going to disappoint. It was time to grace the streets of Gotham as the most terrifying thing he could imagine.

"I don't think youth counselors are terrifying, Tim," Dick said, biting his lip. "But I'll give you an A for effort."

Tim lowered his ray-bands to glare at Dick. "They're peppy extroverts who make oppressed teenagers talk about their *feelings.* Usually on camping trips. They're a very real and disgusting threat to my happiness."

He'd debated being a therapist or soap opera actor, but school and camp counselors actually cropped up in his life from time to time, which meant the terror was more palpable (especially since Tim wasn't allowed to bite them to assert his dominance).

"You did a great job," Dick said, still snickering. "I'm getting flashbacks to my mathelete days. Where did you find the gym coach shorts?"

“Your mom’s house,” Tim said, deadpan.

It’d actually been Dick’s closet, which Tim was never stealing from again. There were too many scarring outfits in there. It hadn’t used to be so bad, but Babs *encouraged* Dick’s atrocious love of glitter and ruffles. Tim didn’t know how she could pretend to date him with a straight face, or insist that Dick actually pulled them off. She was either a dedicated actress or had terrible taste in men. Either way, Tim was judging her.

“The joke’s on you, my mother didn’t have a house,” Dick said. “We lived in a trailer, and she would’ve thought you looked *cute* in that getup.”

“Get your eyes checked,” Tim said. “I think you’re actually going blind.”

Tim’s outfit was a T-shirt with a sunflower and motivational slogans spewed on it, sunglasses that should’ve been banished to the 90’s, Perler bead bracelets, white calf-high socks, and a name tag he’d stolen from his school’s *actual* counselor. Aside from the paperwork and the soulless existence needed to be a legit counselor, Tim was the real deal. It was as authentic as it was horrifying. Tim couldn’t look in the mirror without shuddering.

“Very funny, wise guy,” Dick said, flicking Tim on the forehead. “You’ve got no right to call me out when you’re even more situationally obtuse than *Bruce* in some departments.”

“Am not!” Tim was genuinely appalled at the comparison. He was a great detective who missed *nothing.* If he ignored something, it was because he chose to.

“Right, right. Have fun on your date, lover boy,” Dick said, grabbing his car keys. “I’m going to watch campy Halloween movies with my fiancée.”

“Date?” Tim said, stepping into his crocs. They felt weird since he was also wearing novelty socks. “What date?”

“Told you,” Dick said as he headed toward the garage. “Blind as a bat.”

He left Tim standing in the foyer, befuddled and vaguely annoyed.

What was *that* about?

***

Tim met Greta under the awning of a coffee shop in San Francisco and spent the night trick-or-treating with her at rundown apartment complexes. Greta made herself as solid as possible, and passed as a very pasty person pretending to be a ghost. When that got too hard to maintain, she curled up inside an antique bottle Tim had stolen from the manor's attic and whispered what kind of candy he should grab from the buckets.

Once they'd filled the reusable tote-bag Tim brought instead of a pumpkin (all the better to go with his costume. Counselors were always crying about needing to save sea turtles from plastic straws) the two of them hunkered down on a dilapidated roof to sort their pilfered goods.

"Are you sure you don't want the Kit Kats?" Tim said. "I think they're nasty, so if you don't want them I'll just hide them in Oracle's winter coats' pockets."

"I can't eat them, so there's not really a point," Greta said, floating across from him. She was mostly mist, only a few limbs solidified enough to pass as body parts. "I just want the novelty toys."

Tim nodded and set another plastic eyeball on her pile. Spider shaped rings, pumpkin-shaped erasers, and various doodads were arranged in a little pyramid. It was a much friendlier assortment than Tim would've gotten in Gotham. There were no razor blades hidden in the candy, for one thing. Weird.

"Hey, Tim, I want to ask you something," Greta said, wringing her hands.

Tim glanced up suspiciously. "If you want the Milk Dudes, fat chance. I earned those bad boys."

He liked how they glued his teeth together. It was like eating sticky rocks.

“No, not that, you can have all the candy,” Greta said.

Tim leaned back on his heels and cocked his head. “Okay, so then what is it?”

Greta bit her lip. Her skin was doing that weird, half-solid thing that happened when she was emotional. It was centered on her cheeks, like some kind of ghostly blush. Did ghosts get fevers?

“Um,” she said. “First, thank you for coming with me. It made me super happy. You’re so . . . Nice to me. Really nice.”

Tim nodded, unsure how else to respond.

“Robin, I um, I think you’re really cool!” Greta said, talking almost as fast as Bart.

Tim jerked back, alarmed at the volume. “Uh, you do?”

The air had a graveyard chill, which meant Greta was accidentally starting to open a portal to the realm of the dead. It only happened when she was really emotional, like during Monopoly nights with the team, or while watching K-dramas.

Greta nodded, almost solid enough to pass as a sickly Victorian child. “You’re different than anyone else I’ve met. You’re confident, and handsome, and not scared of me at all.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Tim said. That was sweet. The middle adjective seemed strange though. The only one who called him handsome was Alfred, and that was usually paired with words like ‘dapper’ and ‘charming’ in a sarcastic manner.

“You’re always happy too,” Greta continued, looking at her hands. “Even when people aren’t nice to you.”

“That’s debatable,” Tim said. He wasn’t ashamed to say that he was very petty. Hell had no fury like an irritated dragon. “What’s this about?”

Not that Tim didn’t like getting compliments, but they felt out of the blue. Sure, Greta said a lot of nice things to him, but usually not so many at once.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you something,” Greta said. “It’s been on my mind for a long time.”

Tim groaned. “Does it have to do with emotions? Please say no.”

“I’m not sure, maybe?” Greta said. “Sorry again.”

Tim picked up a packet of Malt candy and shrugged. “It’s fine, I guess. What’s eating you?”

He’d brought this on himself when he dressed as a youth counselor. Now he was giving counsel to a youth. Go figure.

Greta became even mistier as she steeled herself. “How do you like yourself so much?”

Tim blinked slowly. “Huh?”

That hadn’t been what he was expecting. Granted, he didn’t know *what* he’d been expecting, but still.

“You never let anything bother you,” Greta said. “Even when other people say you’re weird, it’s like you don’t hear them. How do you do that?”

“Selective hearing,” Tim said bluntly. He’d inherited it from his mother . . . And father . . . And ancestors on both sides of his family. He was a natural at it, and had spent sixteen years perfecting his skills.

“I wish I had that,” Greta said glumly. “Whenever I hear something bad about me, it’s all I can think about.”

Tim opened a pack of Halloween fruit snacks. “Why? Better question, who’d say anything bad about you?”

Greta was cool. Literally. Tim got chills from hanging out around her. It was very handy when it was hot outside.

“Because I’m a freak,” Greta said, poking one of the novelty toys on the rooftop. “Nobody likes those.”

Tim cocked his head ninety degrees to the side. “You’re really not.”

“Yes I am, look at me!” Greta said, spreading her arms. “Normal girls aren’t dead, or made of mist, or can possess people and drag them to hell. I can’t even go outside without someone pointing at me. Tonight’s the only time I can pretend to be like everyone else, and even then it’s touch and go.” She looked at the streets below somewhat sadly. “I’m tired of not being able to have a life just because I’m dead.”

“Yeah, that sucks,” Tim said, getting nervous. This was veering dangerously into the ‘feelings’ side of things.

“It does!” Greta floated in a circle, getting worked up. “But that’s why you’re so cool. Nothing anyone says or does gets under your skin, and you just—I don’t know how you do it, but I want to be like that. I just . . . I don’t know where to start.”

She deflated. Tim swallowed, feeling as if his grasp of the situation had packed up and moved to Vegas. She wanted self-esteem advice? From him? *Why?* Kon would be better for this question. If Tim liked himself, then Kon was his own number one fan.

But she *had* come to him.

“I don’t think there’s a big secret,” Tim said hesitantly. “All the TV humans say to be yourself, so that’s what I do. It doesn’t always go well, but that’s not my fault, so I don’t let it get to me.”

It wasn’t humanity’s fault they were silly, scatterbrained things with no common sense. It was Tim and Janet’s duty to guide them to enlightenment—or, at the very least, humor their harmless delusions about “morals” and “socializing”—and the two of them were good at forgiving their hoards’ lack of brain power.

“I can’t be myself,” Greta grumbled. “I’m *dead.”*

Fair point, but still not checkmate.

“I miss being alive,” Greta said floating into a sitting position beside him. “I miss being *me.”* She looked at her palms. Longing coated her voice. “I can’t eat, or sleep, or touch anything, and everyone I love is either dead, crazy, or both. Everyone on the team is so nice, but *they* have beating hearts and families, and I never will. It isn’t fair.”

She sniffed, but no tears pooled in her eyes. They couldn’t fall, probably. Ghosts didn’t cry.

Tim shifted uncomfortably. His hair was almost standing on end, and he wanted to bolt. He hadn’t signed up for an emotional talk tonight. He didn’t know what to do. Where were his emotionally competent hoard members when he needed them?

“I’m not sure what to say,” Tim said eventually, deciding to go for broke with honesty. “I don’t think you’re a freak, Greta. You should like yourself more.”

“How?” Greta said. “I feel like a monster. Who could like one of those?”

Tim snorted, thinking of his dad. “Plenty of people, trust me. Besides, monster is a relative word. It only means what you think it does.”

If being different made someone a monster, then Tim figured pretty much everyone would count as one. As far as he was concerned, normal was a scam anyway. Who'd want to be just like everybody else? The same went for collecting things; Tim didn't want just anybody in his hoard. They had to be delightfully strange.

"You're a good person," Tim said, because praise made everyone feel better. "Anyone with eyes can see that. Who cares if you're a little misty? I think it's fun."

It was a shame he couldn't bite her, but that was what Bart and Kon were for.

Greta rested her head on her knees and smiled at Tim. "Thanks, Robin. You're sweet."

"Not really," Tim said. He had it on good authority (Janet) that his blood was salty.

"There's . . . Something else I want to tell you while I'm here," Greta said. "I think now's as good a time as ever."

"Okay," Tim said. "Fire away."

"It's well, how do I put it?" Greta said. She locked eyes with Tim. "I like you. A lot."

Her cheeks were flushed again, almost pearly.

Oh.

Oh *no.*

Tim glanced around the rooftop, desperately hoping there'd be another teenager that Greta was confessing to. But there was nothing, just air. Tim was in serious danger.

He debated throwing the candy at her and flying back to Gotham, but two things stopped him. First was the fact that Greta was non-corporeal and could teleport, so escape was impossible. The second was the haunting memory of when Tim had fumbled rejecting Steph so bad that she'd had self-worth issues for over a year and ghosted him harder than Jason had his own grave. Repeating that was *not* an option, which meant—oh God—Tim had to talk this out.

Dammit, Dick had been right—this *was* a date—but Tim had tuned him out on principle. What a fool he'd been.

"Listen, Greta," Tim said, shifting awkwardly. "I don't really like romance? Or kissing. Or even that weird smolder thing Flynn Rider does in that Disney movie. So, when I say I don't like you that way, it's not about you, just me. Okay?"

Did he do that right? Was that how it was supposed to go? He should've listened to Dick's relationship advice more. Or Jack's. Hell, even Jason's scathing critiques of "realistic" confessions in those romance novels he read would've been useful. Tim was flying blind here, and he hated it.

"That's okay," Greta said, poking a plastic eyeball. "I figured."

Tim stayed tense. "You do?"

They'd just had a huge talk about liking oneself, and now he was saying he didn't like her the way she liked him, and she was fine with that? Tim's brain *hurt* trying to do mental math. He'd come here for candy and a good time, and was honestly feeling so attacked.

"Yeah," Greta nodded. "Spoiler showed me her pin collection."

"O…kay." Tim wasn't going to question that. Next time he saw Steph, he was buying her a waffle cone from Dairy Queen as a thank you for whatever Greta was talking about. "That's good."

"I just wanted to tell you how I feel," Greta said, curling up into a ball. "I'm sick of my whole life being a secret. I thought I'd feel better if I got it off my chest, even if you weren't interested. Sorry."

“Um, it’s fine,” Tim said, starting to relax. “As long as I don’t have to kiss anyone, I’ll be okay.”

He still hadn’t recovered from the trauma of watching reality TV with Dick two years ago. Tim doubted he ever would. He couldn’t imagine being in a relationship all about *feelings,* especially since, well, he kind of took after his mom. Dragons didn’t do casual anything, so if Tim ended up falling for someone, it’d be intense. And Tim didn’t think he was ready to love someone as completely as Janet did. It scared him to think about, even though he wasn’t sure why.

Greta’s smile was wobbly. “Thanks, Robin. I’m glad I could tell you. Um . . . can we still be friends?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t we be?” Tim said. This conversation was giving him whiplash. He’d worked hard to be friends with her and the team. Throwing that away was out of the question.

“Well, if I make you uncomfortable, I can go,” Greta said. “Mr. Doug said I can stay with him whenever he wants. I don’t have to stay on the team.”

Who in the Sam Hill was Mr. Doug? Never mind, there wasn’t time for that, and Tim didn’t care.

“You’re not allowed to go anywhere,” Tim said. “The last thing I need is to spend forever tracking you down just after our team got all buddy-buddy. You’re stuck with all of us whether you like it or not, Greta. Get with the program.”

Honestly, everyone was having a crisis of some kind. First Kon, now her. It was an epidemic. Why were these volatile, super-powered teenagers so dramatic about everything?

“Thanks, Robin,” she said. “You’re a good friend. All of the team is, but especially you.”

Greta’s smile was blinding. Tim had to squint so his retinas wouldn’t dry out. His brain was still a puddle of confusion. Based on what he knew about romance, Greta should’ve been inconsolable. People were never happy about a rejection. This was *weird,* but he wasn’t going to question it.

Tim smiled back. He didn't think he was good at this, to be honest. He was duck-footed from this conversation, and he wasn't as close with Greta as he was with Kon or Bart, so nothing he said felt sincere enough. But he was glad she was happy.

"You're a good friend too, Greta," Tim said. "I know you're not happy you're dead, but I think the team would be a lot lonelier if you weren't there. So, you should stick around."

If she did, Tim could get to know her better. Maybe even hoard her, if he felt brave enough for that.

Greta bit her lip. "Maybe. But I think I need to do some soul searching. You're right, I need to like myself more. I can't do that if I don't learn how."

Despite himself, Tim felt sad. "You're leaving?"

"Maybe just for a little bit," Greta said. "Is that okay?"

No, it wasn't. Tim liked keeping the people he cared about close. But he wasn't hoarding her, so he didn't get final say.

"Peachy keen," Tim said, giving her a slightly faker smile. "Good talk."

"Yeah," she said, smile genuine. "It was."

The rest of the night was spent organizing their haul, then going to Mount Justice to hide Greta's stash in one of the empty cupboards. She waved goodbye and said something about traveling to the land of the dead for a bit to get closure for something, then vanished in a poof of otherworldly terror.

Tim went back to Wayne Manor, oddly conflicted.

"How did your date go, Baby Bird?" Jason said when Tim hopped out of the zeta tube. "Dick was telling me all about it. You know, for an oblivious terror, you sure have a lot of game."

“Har har,” Tim said, itching to get out of his costume. “It was fine. We talked, I said no, we’re still friends, and all’s well that ends well. If you want drama, you’ll have to watch a telenovela. Good night.”

Tim went upstairs and laid on his mattress, frowning at he thought about the night. He was glad he got to talk to Greta, but he still didn’t understand her. He couldn’t imagine not liking himself. Even when times were hard, he could rest easy knowing that he was a dragon and could overcome any obstacle. Hating that part of himself was a foreign concept.

He rubbed his eyes, then stared at his fleshy human hand. Well, maybe not completely foreign. Perhaps Greta was just more honest with herself. Tim had a habit of ignoring what he didn’t like. Jack and the Waynes were trying to get him to stop that. They said it wasn’t healthy.

“Weirdos,” Tim muttered, tucking his hand under his pillow, out of sight.

He fell into an uneasy sleep, and dreamed about splitting in half and not knowing which part of himself to pick.

When he woke up, an odd, guilty feeling welled in his chest. Greta probably hadn’t realized how on the ball she’d been when she talked with him. He still hadn’t told the team he was a dragon. It was funny watching them flounder. But . . . Well . . . He was starting to think he should.

“Later,” he muttered to himself, “too tired to have a crisis right now.”

He buried himself deeper in his pillows and blocked out the world again. He’d have to talk to Bart about ending their prank, if only because it wasn’t funny to hide something like this when it wasn’t a joke anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Greta, bursting back into Mt. Justice: Great news, guys, I was friendzoned!
YJ: ....That's....Nice?

Steph *weeping in the corner*: and you're taking it so well too.

BTW, "Mr. Doug" is canonically what Greta calls Darkseid, who she eventually apprentices under during her Evil Arc. That won't be happening here, but it still cracks me up that Mr. Big Bad himself took a look at Spooky Sunshine girl and tried to sign the adoption papers. Real Batman moment. Good for him.

(Greta's soul-searching also may or may not also involve finding her Brother Harm's ghost and kicking him in the balls as revenge for electrocuting her to death)

The Rodeo's Revenge

Chapter Summary

Nothing fixes team drama like an old foe.

Chapter Notes

My brother and I *see fluffy blankets on sale*

Me: We don't need blankets.
Brother: No, we have too many.
Me: ...But Christmas is coming soonish, so I can buy you one and it won't count as a selfish purchase.
Brother: Yes. And I can buy YOU one.
Me *stuffing blankets into the cart*: Wow you're so generous.
Brother: Likewise. We might as well be angels.

(Ignore how we spend the same amount of money on each other as it was to but them for outselves. Modern problems require modern solutions).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bart's reaction to coming clean about Tim's dragonness was vehement and absolute.

"No!" the speedster said, then rolled on the floor. "Never! We worked too hard, Tim. Don't betray me like this!"

"Bart, come on," Tim said, flopping on the floor next to him. They were in Max Mercury's living room; the shag carpet smelled musty, and the ceiling had that weird, popcorny pattern that old houses were obsessed with. Helen, Max's daughter, was in the kitchen making gumbo. "If we said any longer, there could be drama."

"I like drama," Bart said. "It sings to my soul."

"Mood," Tim said, grabbing Bart's ankle, just to hold. "But some drama is fun and some isn't."

If Young Justice got emotional, it was game over. Tim was *not* dealing with another rodeo-esque nightmare. He wasn't built to survive conflicts like that. While they were buddy-buddy now, he hadn't quite gotten around to granting hoard status to all of the team, and he sure as heck fire wasn't going to before telling them he was a dragon. The Waynes were dramatic enough. Tim didn't need *another* human-shaped fire to put out in his quest for friendship and fun times.

Bart tried to get up, but Tim kept a grip on his ankle to keep him on the floor. The smell of boiled fish and Old Bay wafted in from the kitchen.

"They weren't that mad when they figured out my secret," Bart said. "It'll be fine."

"I dunno," Tim said, rubbing a circle onto Bart's ankle. "Yours was different."

It was just a silly joke about the 31st century. Tim's, meanwhile, was grounded in the present.

"Was not!" Bart said. "Besides, your dad is all weird about you telling people, so they'll understand. If not, we'll tell Max or Batman that they're not respecting your boundaries. They're always willing to throw hands over that."

Tim grimaced. Telling the Authority Figures would end in an hour's long lecture for Young Justice. Definitely a last resort. Tim had been on the receiving end of such lectures, and it sucked.

Bart rolled over, flopping on Tim's stomach. "Just keep it a little longer, please? It's not like we haven't been giving them hints."

"I guess," Tim said, thinking about the very, *very* obvious tells he'd being doing in front of them. From contorting himself in ways that weren't ordinarily possible to not-so-subtly implying he wasn't human, somebody other than Slobo should've caught on by now. Honestly, it was doing them a favor to show how oblivious they could be.

But . . .

“It’d just be nice, is all,” Tim said, staring up at the popcorn ceiling, “not to have to pretend in front of them.”

All his life, he’d been hiding in one way or another. Jack, Janet, and his hoard were the only people he could be the unfiltered Tim around. Everywhere else he was ankle-deep in pretending to be just human. Not even Robin was an exception. It’d been fun to purposefully keep up the act with Young Justice, but it might be even better to have all his cards on the table. Honesty wasn’t Tim’s strong suit, but Dick was always telling him to try new things. Why not this?

“OK, fair point. I don’t like hiding my speed-force stuff either,” Bart said, still plastered on Tim. “How about after our next big mission ends? They can’t be mad if they just won a fight.”

Tim nodded slowly. “Yeah, that’s true.”

Nothing set the mood like engaging in good, old-fashioned violence. Young Justice wouldn’t care so much about over a year of lying if Tim casually mentioned it on a field of victory.

“I agree to your terms, Impulse, sage of wisdom,” Tim said. “Thank you for imparting such great knowledge upon my ears.”

He had a plan now, and a timeline. Pretty much all his anxiety was gonzo bonzo.

“Anything for you, my scaly buddy,” Bart said. “Want to race across the state again? I want to see if you can catch up to me.”

Tim opened his mouth to say that was literally impossible (Tim was fast, but not *that* fast) when Helena poked her head into the living room.

“Save your hyper-time for later, kiddos,” she said. “Soup’s up.”

Tim grunted as Bart elbowed him in the stomach as he bolted to his feet, then chased the speedster into the kitchen to feast on gumbo. It wasn’t the *best* food Tim ever ate (the fish wasn’t alive enough for his taste) but it warmed him up and made him cackle while Bart chattered about his

friends at school. Max and Helena exchanged identically wry expressions above his and Bart's heads, but they were easily ignored. With a full belly and his best friend nearby, Tim felt much happier about today.

No coming clean yet, but soon. And when it happened, it'd be okay. Bart promised it'd go well, and Tim (even after learning he'd been lied to about the future for over a year) believed him.

***

There was only one flaw with his and Bart's plan. Waiting until "the next big mission" turned out to be complicated, because over the next couple of weeks, Young Justice practically imploded.

Tim had known there was drama going on, but he hadn't realized how much. Cissie had been going through a "will she won't she" era with vigilantism, but after she'd almost murdered a guy who'd killed her social worker, she said wasn't "stable enough" for hero work (much to Tim's dismay and confusion) and usually only showed up for social events

Meanwhile, Anita was trying to figure out how to raise her parents after they'd been murdered, brought back to life, and turned into infants by a shaman shortly before Halloween, so Tim didn't see her much anymore. (Bruce was making sure she had all the financial and social help she could. Tim was fairly sure the only reason the man hadn't tried to adopt her was because she had extended family looking after her right now).

Speaking of Halloween, Greta was still AWOL more often that not. From what Tim understood, she was still soul searching and spent a lot of her time wandering the realm of the dead, only popping up when the team lured her out for normal teen activities like movie nights and stupid bets. She was friendly and chipper (no drama at all, yay) but was distracted from the team.

Slobo was also gone more often than not, either busy challenging anything that moved to a fight or chasing his Supercycle down when the sentient vehicle got tired of his BS and ditched him (usually in the Mojave desert). He wasn't a team player, so it wasn't much of a loss. Tim didn't want to hoard him anyway. They bond was one built on mutual violence and lots of blood, and that was the way Tim wanted it to stay. Good fight buddies were hard to find. The last thing he wanted to do was get *attached,* even if he sulked for an entire day when Slobo had to cancel their fight club meet-up.

Long story short, the team was leaking members like water from a sieve. With only half the usual members, Young Justice had to coordinate its missions more carefully. Tim, Bart, Kon, and Cassie had been doing everything together by sheer necessity. As a consequence, Tim knew them better than anyone else, and his adoration was heading quickly into the possessive "squish their cheeks and lock them in the basement " category. That was usually reserved for just the Bats, which was how Tim knew the remaining members of Young Justice were proper hoard.

Still, he missed having the full roster. Amid the interpersonal chaos—like how Cissie and Cassie bounced between talking and not talking to each other on an hourly basis—and the general insanity of being teen vigilantes, there wasn't a chance for Tim to subtly drop his dragon lore on everyone, so his secret stayed secret.

He'd asked Babs if he should tell them over text, and she'd given him this *look* that said no in every language known to sentient life, so that idea was killed in its cradle. Tim was stuck in a rut of secrecy that he suddenly didn't like, and by the 15th, Tim was ready to throw in the towel and tell them cold-turkey. But, minutes before he sent a text to gather the team, the supercomputer in Mt. Justice pinged with an update on a new shipment of portal guns.

The stupid, laser-cowboy rodeo guns/kryptonite smugglers with their own knockoff Amazo factory. *Those* portal guns.

Tim stared at it, then called over Kon, Bart, and Cassie for an emergency meeting.

"Is this for real?" Cassie said, arms crossed. "We finally have a lead on those rodeo clowns?"

"Not clowns," Tim said, bouncing in excitement. "But yeah. We should call everyone in."

"Yes!" Bart said, throwing both hands in the air. "Wait, why?"

Kon leaned against the console as he squinted at the screen. "I agree with Impulse. We can take these guys, Rob. We don't need backup."

Cassie elbowed him in the ribs. "Backup is *never* a bad thing, SB. But I have to agree with you. Everyone's pretty busy."

Her face fell. Tim wondered if she was thinking about her and Cissie's fights. They'd been arguing about Arrowette quitting the hero business a lot, which was drama he didn't want to get in the middle of. He'd meddled with Steph and Cass earlier this year, and that'd been his limit. As long as he could hang out with Arrowette now and then, he didn't care if she was in costume or not.

"We don't *need* them, per se," Tim said, steepling his fingers, "but I think it'd be good for us to do one last mission together."

Three heads turned toward him.

"Last?" Cassie said in alarm. "What do you mean, last?"

Tim shrugged. "Well, Anita and Cissie are semi-retired, and everyone else is drifting. We're still friends, but I'm not sure how much longer we can do stuff like this together. So, it'd be nice to have one last mission with all the OGs, just in case something happens down the road."

Tim didn't like thinking about it (it only felt like yesterday that he'd finally gotten to be an official member of the team) but he could read the writing on the wall. Tim doubted the Young Justice would be so easy to bring back together once they officially cut ties. It made him sad, but since he still had Cassie, Bart, and Kon, it was an acceptable range of sad. No danger of tears at the moment.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Kon said, subdued. "It's been a while since we all hung out together."

The four of them looked around the empty cave. The beanbags were kicked into the corner, the table didn't have crumbs on it because there weren't as many people munching on Pringles 24/7, and there wasn't a gaggle of teenagers polishing weapons on the couches. Without the crowd, HQ felt too big to relax in.

"It's not the end though, right?" Bart said, vibrating nervously. "You guys aren't going to retire too, are you?"

“Of course not,” Cassie said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not quitting *ever.* Being a hero is my dream. Besides, we’ve got each other. Even if we’re not on a team, we’re still friends.”

Bart brightened like a sunflower after the clouds parted. “Yeah! Friends forever. I’ll summon them!”

He vanished in a blur of static. Moments later the group chat exploded with memes and info about the mission, along with warnings that Impulse was on his way to grab any and all teammates like a taxi of well-intentioned abduction.

Tim smiled at the group chat. One last mission. What could go wrong?

***

Gathering the team took half an hour. Bart grabbed Arrowette and Empress fairly quick, but Slobo and Secret took longer to track down. Slobo was in Australia trying to kickbox a mildly annoyed kangaroo, and Greta had refused to leave the land of the dead for a solid twenty minutes. Eventually, Cassie lured her out by playing ABBA on full blast and staging a tea party with the team’s plushies, but it hadn’t been easy.

Convincing everyone to go on a final mission together was also an arduous task. Cissie dug her heels in, Anita had to find a babysitter last minute for her infant-parents, Slobo still wanted to kickbox the kangaroo, and Greta sulked in the corner mistier than ever. It was enough to give Tim a headache.

“Please guys, it’s our last hurrah,” Kon said.

“That’s what you said about the intergalactic baseball game,” Cissie said, pointing an accusing finger at him. “*And* the Disco-Hell demon incident, and—”

“Alright, alright yeesh, we hear you,” Kon said, “but this really is the last time. Stop being lame already. We miss you guys.”

“Besides,” Tim added, looking up from the super computer. “This is revenge.”

That got people’s attention. Tim explained *who* they were targeting, and suddenly people were raring to go. The rodeo fiasco had been a disaster, and everyone wanted to get even with the cowboy criminals. It helped that whoever they were had gotten their hands on kryptonite, so kicking them to the curb was suddenly a much higher priority.

“I guess I can put on my suit again,” Cissie said, fingers reaching for where her quiver usually rested. “It’s for a worthy cause.”

“Yeah,” Slobo said, smashing his fists together. “Let’s pound those pathetic Amazo knockoffs into the ground.”

“I’m all for this,” Anita said. “But don’t we need a plan?”

Tim grinned. “Don’t worry, Empress, leave that to me.”

Compared with breaking into Arkham, infiltrating these guys’ secret base was a piece of cake.

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And cake it was, although it took some finagling. The trouble with teleporters was that they made criminals hard to track down. Without knowing when and where they’d show up, it was difficult for Young Justice to capture or track them. After the rodeo, it’d been even more difficult because the weapons shipments got stealthier. Tim had had to get creative to find them, but he knew that once he did, that was only where the battle began. Once they found the crooks, they needed to take out the entire operation in one go, otherwise it’d pop back up later on.

Solution? They needed to get to the base. The only way to do that was to fight fire with fire; namely, steal a shipment of the teleporter guns and blast themselves with the portals directly to the big bad HQ

It was *not* a Bat-approved plan. If Bruce knew about it the lectures would be never ending. Blah blah, self-endangerment and recklessness, yadda yadda. Tim had heard it before. But without more information on the layout of the base, it was their only option. Luckily, Tim's teammates weren't nitpicky when it came to plans. They liked his idea because they (unlike other, boring, lame adults in Tim's life) appreciated his genius.

So, once they had gone over the details, Young Justice swarmed the arms deal the super computer had pinged and began operation Just Vengeance. It worked great. Goons lay dazed on the ground ready for police to cart them off, the guns were captured, and Tim was able to activate the teleporter without difficulty.

The problems only started *after* they jumped through the portal.

Young Justice appeared in the giant factory floor and was immediately swarmed by Amazo guards. It was like a bad parody of the last time Tim had been here. The same machines were open, the robots were everywhere, and the same weird scientists were yelling commands at each other and activating other security measures. It turned into a brawl within seconds, and Tim didn't like his team's odds.

"Impulse, Plan Theta!" Tim yelled.

Bart jumped away from the Amazo he'd been beating with a wrench, then made Roadrunner noises as he ran deeper into the base on his own. Tim and the others would keep fighting as a distraction, but hopefully Bart would remember his instructions and destroy both the facility's research labs and the Amazo production line in the meantime.

"I'll help too," Greta said, clapping her hands.

"But we need you—" Tim began, but it was too late. Greta vanished in a swirl of mist, and only the dead knew where she was now.

Great. Fine. They'd deal. Greta could do a lot of information gathering, so Tim wasn't too worried. Besides, she didn't have a lot of luck possessing non-living things, so fighting the robots was difficult for her in the first place.

Granted though, it was difficult for all of them, especially now that they were missing two people.

“I thought you said you had a plan,” Anita said as she dodged a swipe from an Amazo.

“I did,” Tim said, avoiding a drone with a knife attached to it as it flew past his head. Where did *that* come from? “The current step is relying on your brawn.”

Slobo screamed as he ripped a robot’s head off and flung it at the ceiling. He was following the plan perfectly. He was also being mobbed by the most Amazos, but that was also part of the plan. Tim knew he could count on his fight-buddy to be a meat shield for the squishy humans.

“Your confidence in us is great, but I want a new strategy,” Cissie said, bumping into Tim. “I’m running out of arrows.”

Already? Tim forgot quivers could only hold so many.

“I’m getting sick from all the ambient Kryptonite,” Kon said, landing on the ground with a thud. His bronzed skin had a green undertone. “There must be a crate of it nearby.”

That *really* wasn’t good.

Tim looked around, trying to find a way to put the odds in their favor. The main floor of the base looked the same as the last time Tim had been dumped in it; deactivated portals, giant equipment, half-assembled Amazos, and dozens of scientists in lab coasts running around like headless chickens.

Well, all but *one* of the scientists. There was one on a raised platform a hundred yards away, frantically pushing buttons and yelling commands in a shrill voice. Tim remembered that guy. It was the red-haired, manic one. He was annoying and totally ripping off Bart’s iconic hairstyle.

“Change of plan,” Tim said, getting into a running position. “Target the machinery and get those scientists tied up. I’ve got other fish to fry.”

“What does that—” Cassie began.

Tim broke into a sprint, bent so far in half that he was horizontal to the floor. In a perfect world, Tim would transform and fly to the dais, but he was concerned with all the laser beams in the air. A bigger body meant a bigger target and he didn’t feel like getting riddled with holes, so running it was. He zigzagged between Amazos, planting bat-bombs on their sides to detonate after he passed, and baseball slid under a conveyor belt and leapfrogged over a frazzled blond scientists he bee-lined for Mr. Short, Manic, and Angry.

Halfway there, Tim skittered around some machinery as three Amazos peeled off to pursue him. They yelled commands for him to stop, and Tim flipped them the bird as he channeled every ounce of speed into his legs. Tim resented his human body’s limitations. Stupid human body. Stupid weak legs. Stupid *not having wings.* The only thing this form had going for it was opposable thumbs, and even those cramped up after too many hours playing video games.

“Stay back, hero of false justice!” the scientist yelled when Tim was within a hundred feet. “You will never foil my plans!”

An Amazo tried to tackle Tim from behind. He extended his collapsible bo, broke the lens in its eye, and spun in one fluid move to spit acid into the hole. Smoke rose from its skull as it melted from the inside and short-circuited. Tim tucked, rolled, and kept running without pause.

“Resourceful, I see, but not clever enough!” The scientist continued. “You’ll never survive against the might of my—”

Tim casually smashed the knife drone out of the air as it came at him again. It hit the ground and shattered.

“*Winston, no!”* the scientist yelled.

Tim pulled out his grapple and fired it at the platform. It wrapped around the railing, and Tim rocketed forward as the line retracted. His eyes focused on the tablet the scientist was holding. Ten to one odds that was what was controlling the Amazos.

“You bested my best soldier, but you’ll never triumph over us all!” The scientist said, practically frothing at the mouth. “No matter how smart you think you are, you’ll never best the genius of Dr. Spencer Xavier Ree—”

Tim’s fist collided with the man’s nose. There was a loud, satisfying crunch as he went flying against the opposite railing so fast his glasses fell off.

“Genius, yeah right,” Tim said, spitting onto his knuckles to wipe the blood off. “You’re not even a player. I eat losers like you for breakfast.”

To make his point, he raised his arms into the Sailor Moon pose he and Cass had found on YouTube. It was an insult steeped in weebo culture, and this guy deserved every inch of its devastating effectiveness.

“I’ll get you for this, meddling Bat,” the scientist—Dr. Something—wheezed.

Tim kicked the guy in the head to knock him out and grabbed the tablet off the ground. The screen was cracked, but it still worked. A complicated array of coding for the Amazos lit it up like Christmas.

“Time to make Oracle proud,” Tim said gleefully. The evil goons would rue the day they allowed him access to technology.

He swiped through the list of commands for the Amazos and made them target non-organic enemies. Now, they’d only attack each other, which made them practically no threat. Cissie would like that. Robots did not good targets for arrows make.

Tim allowed himself a moment to preen, then pulled another bat-bomb out of his pouch and stuck it to the platform console. He grabbed the unconscious scientist and jumped back to ground level before it detonated.

“You’re lucky B is so fanatical about the sanctity of life, or I’d totally leave you for dead,” Tim told the guy as he dropped him onto the concrete. He stuck his tongue out at him and dashed away, tablet tucked under his arm.

Bart would be finished with his mission of destruction soon, but there were still plenty of machines to break here. Tim shook his fingers into claws and ripped out wires on his way back to the others, gleeful in his wrath.

The Amazos were almost all destroyed now (Slobo had taken advantage of their distraction to continue his imitation of the Predator on their spines) but contrary to expectations, the battle was fat from over. While Tim had been gone the scientists had opened one of the big portals. Now, a dozen human soldiers were joining the fray, dressed in a variety of disguises. Tim spotted a few cowboys among them.

Texans, great.

Even worse, they were armed with green-tipped spears, laser guns, and enough back-alley weaponry to make Deathstroke raise his remaining eyebrow. Tim got back to his team and opened the tablet again, trying to find a setting that would target just the new mercenaries and growled when he couldn't. Who built this thing? It was glitchy and not nearly customizable enough.

"Rob, a little help here?" Superboy yelped, dodging a kryptonite throwing knife. He stumbled, nearly twisting an ankle.

"Working on it," Tim said, still struggling with the tablet. How could these guys have made *teleporters and fake Amazos,* but didn't know how to design an app for their robots? This was bullshit.

"Rob!"

"I said I'm—" Tim looked up just as a beefy mercenary in riot gear raised a spear tipped with a bright, glowing green rock and aimed it directly at Kon.

The smart move would have been to warn Kon or attack the goon directly, but Tim was acting on instincts, and those instincts screamed to protect his super at all costs. Before he could think, he dropped the tablet and leapt forward to shove Kon out of the way.

The kyrptonite spear pierced Tim through the shoulder. He crumpled like a butterfly against a car window and hit his head against the ground with a loud crack. *Ow.*

"Robin!" Kon yelled.

Tim wanted to say he was okay, but his ears rang and the world spun. Head trauma beat dragon powers, and Tim was also losing a lot of blood. The last thing he saw as his eyes slid shut were more portals opening and all the reserve forces coming out of the woodwork while his friends tried and failed to hold them off.

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Tim woke up and regretted it. It was, unfortunately, a familiar feeling. He suspected he'd been in this exact situation before, but for the life of him couldn't figure out what situation this even *was.*

His shoulder had something in it. Something big and metal. When Tim cracked his eyes open, the light was blinding. It took nearly a minute to focus his vision. When he did, nothing made sense.

This wasn't home. Where was Jack? He never left Tim's side when he was injured, especially in the aftermath of one of Tim and Janet's fights. Given how hurt Tim was, it *had* to have been another mother-son murder attempt. Nobody else got the drop on him so thoroughly.

His eyes landed on a battered, sickly looking Kon chained to the wall in a cell across from him, and Tim's brain finally kicked in. Not mother-son bonding time, then.

"Wha hap'n?" Tim said, grimacing at the gross aftertaste in his mouth. Dragon breath, yuck.

Kon jerked upright, then sighed in relief. "Robin, you're awake!"

"Yay! I thought you were dead. It was totally mode," Bart said, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. "Don't faint again Rob, I'm too far away to feel your pulse."

Tim blinked. “Impulse?”

He turned his head. The entire team—sans Greta—was locked up and put behind cartoonishly stereotypical bars. All of them were thrashed. They’d need new costumes after this. There was no salvaging that much burned fabric, and Cassie needed another haircut. She’d be bald at this rate.

Tim made a confused noise, piecing together what he remembered from before he’d been knocked out. None of of his shoddy recollection helped him figure out how they’d been captured, sadly.

Like the rest of the team, Tim was in shackles. His were looser, however, and he was in a cell opposite theirs. The tip of the kryponite spear was still lodged in his shoulder, but the shaft had been removed. Tim was glad whoever put him in here hadn’t let him bleed out. That’d have been an embarrassing way to go.

“Don’t move, Robin, they got you good,” Cassie said, trying to inch closer to him. Her chains went taught almost instantly. “Just take it easy. We’ll get you to medical as soon as possible.”

“Cool,” Tim croaked. He liked that idea; being impaled was not fun. The pain was doable, but the blood loss was annoying. It made him dizzy, and the earlier blow to his head didn’t help. “Where are we?”

“The dungeon,” Bart said. “They captured and threw us in here. I bet it’s in one of the presidents’ noses.”

“The *what?”* Tim said.

“Noses,” Impulse said. “I found a window, and we’re in South Dakota. They put the evil base inside Mount Rushmore. It’s the last place anyone would look.”

Tim flopped his head back against the floor. “That is so dumb.”

He made a note to create a Bad Guy Bingo card with various national monuments on it as likely villain hide outs. There was something about touristy areas that called to the criminally inclined.

“So dumb it’s genius?” Bart said.

“No, just dumb,” Tim said. He should’ve stayed unconscious. Why did Bruce’s villains get cool bases like planets made of lava or lairs full of creepy experiments, but Tim’s mooched off the national park service and built knockoff murder robots? It wasn’t fair. He wanted an antagonist refund.

“Why are you captured with us?” Tim asked Impulse, trying to refocus. “I thought you were destroying the rest of the base.”

“I was,” Bart whined. “But they figured out what I was doing and put up tripwires. I was ambushed, Rob, and they have a stupid magic guy helping them out. I can’t even vibrate through these chains.”

Bart rattled his shackles for emphasis, then vibrated to show how they glowed purple and stopped him from phasing through them.

That caught Tim’s attention and made their situation a hundred times worse. Kon and Cassie also seemed unable to break out of their bonds using super strength, which was seriously no bueno.

“We knew they had some kind of magician on their side,” Anita said. “It’s the only way their tech works. But I was hoping they’d be a one trick pony.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “I don’t have experience fighting magic people.”

Gotham didn’t attract a lot of them. It was actually interesting how few magicians made their way into the city. Jason said it was because Gotham was rumored to be quintuple cursed and forsaken by God, but Tim didn’t know how true that was. Either way, the lack of spellcasters there meant Tim wasn’t used to handling them. The gap in his otherwise thorough resume of crime fighting irked him.

“Do you think their Harry Potter ripoff is how they got the portals working again?” Cissie said, trying to shimmy her hands out of the shackles. She was close, but seemed reluctant to go full-send

and dislocate her thumb. “I thought Rob broke them earlier.”

“I did,” Tim said. “There’s no way they stood up to my bat-bombs.”

The portal frames had been made out of aluminum. Not exactly explosive-proof metal.

“Regardless, we have to get out of here,” Cassie said. “We’re lucky they haven’t killed us yet, but given how last time they wanted to throw Spoiler and Slobo into a black hole, I’m not holding my breath—and Robin needs help.”

“Mm fine,” Tim slurred. “Pain’s not real.”

“Medical *and* psychiatric help,” Cassie continued.

Wow, rude.

“We also need to find Greta,” Anita said. “I’m not leaving without her.”

“Okay. Then to start, we’ll—”

Everyone tensed as the door to the cells creaked open. So much for planning.

Tim focused his vision as several people entered with all the pomp of video game mid-bosses, flanked by a half dozen goons. He didn’t recognize any of them, but the way they puffed their chests hinted that they thought themselves important. Ergo, they were probably high on the chain of command or had helped fund this nightmare Amazo factory.

Tim tried to pay attention to them—he really did—but his shoulder ached from being impaled and his head throbbed, so most of their grandstanding went over his head. He caught words like “unstoppable army,” “breakthrough technology,” and various people “not standing a chance,” but the rest washed over him like water on a duck’s back. A drake’s back? Those were ducks, right? Woah, he was *made* for that idiom.

One of the goons banged on his cell bars and told him to pay attention. Tim blinked groggily. Right, evil lecture. He should probably tune back into it.

"You'll never get away with this," Cassie said. "We've caught you twice already, and we're not the only heroes after you. Your little science project's lifespan is over."

"Yeah," Bart added. "You're toast without butter!"

Head Honcho No. 3—a tall, mustached man with a rose-colored tie—snorted. "Such confidence, but *you* are the ones who are toast. Even the Justice league will be unable to stop us soon. You may have destroyed our production lab, but the entire mountain is filled with Amazos and backup weaponry. You'll never be able to destroy it all."

Tim decided not to point out the stupidity of saying that to Young Justice of all people. They'd take it as a challenge.

"As for the damaged equipment, that is easily repaired," Head Honcho continued. "Our resources are manifold, and as of now are full of untapped potential."

"*Untapped what?"* A new, snippy voice said, echoing from every corner of the room. *"I'm not potential, losers. I'm the whole package."*

Young Justice looked around, but Tim didn't see anyone. The hair on his arms stood on end. The only person he knew that could turn invisible was Greta, but that wasn't her voice. It was too pretentious and whiny, with a nasal lilt that he disliked on principle.

Head Honcho closed his eyes and looked at the ceiling. For a moment, he traded his intimidation act for a look of longsuffering.

"Nothing, Lord Klarion," he said with a sigh. "I meant no offense."

The shadows coalesced in the middle of the hallway, meshing together into a wad of darkness that grew limbs and fused into a child dressed in funeral attire. His skin was sallow, his eyes red, and his hair was gelled into a pair of horns. In his arms was a tabby cat that mewled in boredom, despite just having been reassembled by its molecules.

"You got my name wrong again," Klarion said, floating five feet off the ground in criss-cross applesauce. "It's Klarion the Witch-Boy, Dun Dun Dun! The sound effect is very important."

"Thank you, Lord Klarion," Head Honcho began. "But—"

"You got it wrong again!"

A vein in Head Honcho's temple throbbed, the size of a caterpillar. He repeated Klarion's full title through gritted teeth, assured him that he was an invaluable asset in the company, and that they were happy with whatever assistance he could provide them with.

If Tim wasn't struggling to stay conscious and impaled with a glowy space rock, he'd have found the situation humorous. But he was, so the only concern he had was how to get his friends out of this mess. He'd been confident in escaping when it was just robots and evil scientists, but a Lord of Chaos was another beast.

"I can't believe you're working with these losers," Kon said to Klarion. "People told me you had class, panache, whimsy, but you're just a sellout to evil corporate American mercenary startups. I can't believe I wanted to hire you to harass Superman."

Tim couldn't believe Kon considered hiring a villain when he could've had Tim do it for free. Clearly, their friendship game needed to level up if Tim wasn't being included on pranks.

Klarion snorted and stroked his cat. "Who cares about these idiots? I was *bored,* and I've never mixed magic and machines before. It's been a fun hobby."

"And we are grateful," Head Honcho said quickly. "In fact, we'd be even more grateful if you went back to repairing those machines. If you'd like we can double your pay—"

Klarion snapped his fingers, and suddenly Head Honcho didn't have a mouth.

"What I want," Klarion said as the man pawed at his face, scream muffled by his new lack of lips, "is entertainment, and these guys look way more fun than you."

He grinned, and Tim's friends leaned back. Even Anita, their resident magic dabbler, looked worried. Tim was too, but unlike them he channeled his fear into proper, respectable anger.

"Quit staring at them," he hissed, baring his human teeth. "They're *mine."*

Klarion glanced at Tim, then double-taked. His eyes widened the longer he stared at Tim. The Witch Boy's pupils were like staring into a pool of cave water, lightless and void of a reflection, but so very deep. Tim had the sensation of seeing something both far older and younger than its outward form appeared, and knew instinctively that it was dangerous in a way unlike anything else he'd encountered.

"Oh, I *like* you," Klarion purred.

Before anyone could stop him, the Lord of Chaos phased through the bars and grabbed Tim by the throat. One moment he was on the ground, the next he was effortlessly pinned against the wall by the tiny chaos child.

"Get away from him!" Kon shouted.

"Rob!" Bart cried.

Tim coughed and hissed, writhing to get loose from his bonds, but all his struggles did was jostle his injuries. The cat in Klarion's other arm meowed in a mocking way. Tim made a mental note to eat it.

"Let him go, Klarion. We don't have time for your mischief!" One of the evil minions snapped from outside the cell.

Wait, one of the *minions?* Tim's oxygen must have been getting cut off.

"Release him. The heroes are being interrogated on how much information has been leaked to the enemy. We don't have time for your tomfoolery," the minion continued. "The Madam told you to behave today. Our plans are almost complete—"

"The ma'am can stuff a sock in it, she didn't tell me there would be something as rare as *this* here," Klarion giggled, tightening his grip on Tim's throat. "I've never seen anything like it. I'm going to have so much *fun* with you, Robin."

Mental alarm bells range so loudly in Tim's ears that they almost deafened him. He didn't like how that was phrased at all. He growled, fingers beginning to lengthen into claws. But before he could swipe at the demon kid, Klarion pressed a hand against his face and—

And—

And—

Tim screamed as something important inside him *wriggled* and *twisted*. Up and down went topsy turvy, his atoms started dancing Cotton Eye Joe, and everything *hurt.* Thinking was impossible, getting away wasn't even conceivable. All he could understand was the sensation of tearing and bubbling below his skin.

Just as quickly it was gone. Tim went slack, head lolling as he tried to breathe. This felt worse than being tased—worse than *molting.*

"Ooh, this reaction is new," Klarion said. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Tim didn't even have the energy to quip. If Klarion weren't holding him up, he would've already collapsed.

"What did you do to him? Robin? Rob!" Cassie yelled, but Tim didn't want to risk opening his mouth since he'd probably throw up.

"Nothing much," Klarion giggled. "You should be more worried about what I'm *going* to do."

"Klarion—" the minion snapped, but the Witch Boy wasn't listening.

"I'm bored with this job," he said, shadows gathering on his sleeves. "You can keep the portals I made, but I'm not coming back. Whatever this guy is promises to be *way* more entertaining than you. Hopefully he'll last a while though. I tend to be hard on my toys."

Black mist poured from the Klarion's sleeves and enveloped both him and Tim. Both the evil minions and Young Justice heroes yelled in sync, but they were helpless to stop Klarion when he actually put effort into his spells.

Tim and the Witch boy vanished into smoke, leaving the entire Evil Plot and his buddies behind. Tim had been kidnapped by a goth kid and a cat. This was officially the worst day of his life.

Chapter End Notes

YJ: NO, ROBIN!
Goons: NO, KLARION!
YJ: Make him come back!
Goons: we don't know how.
YJ: WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW HOW?

Meanwhile:

Greta: I wonder what this button does? Boop!
System announcement: REACTOR CORE ACTIVATED. IMPLOSION IMMINENT.
Greta: Oops. I better find everyone before this place goes boom. They would make very grumpy ghosts.

Two Sides of a Scale

Chapter Summary

Ordinarily, Tim would've loved to hang out with Klarion and cause untold chaos, but any potential friendship is being hardcore spoiled by the current hostage situation. :/

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay on this one. I've been swamped, and next week is bad too, so apologies if there's a delay again. I'm just trying to survive. T-T

Meanwhile, Mt. Rushmore:

Kon: Is anybody else worried about the flashing lights and automated anouncement telling everyone to evacuate before we're blown to smithereens?
Anita: If I die tied up in a hijiacked national monument because a bunch of mad scientists crossed their wires wrong, I'm haunting everything.
Bart: Yeah, me too!
Great *popping out of the floor*: I promise it's not as fun as it sounds. Why are you guys in jail? I thought we were winning earlier.
Cassie: Not important, just get us out!
Greta: Of course! Just one se---wait, where's Robin?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Contrary to popular belief, Tim had great control over his temper. He'd only let himself get truly angry was when the Joker murdered Jason, and even that had been tempered by two years of meticulous plotting. Even in Arkham, when he and Jason had brutally ripped the man to pieces, Tim had been in control.

Right now, however, that control was slipping.

Klarion was a dick. An annoying, bratty, ego-maniac one that got off torturing Tim. The cat was even worse; Tim couldn't speak feline, but he knew it was laughing at him. As soon as Tim could, he was biting it in half and swallowing. But therein was the problem; moving was a *bit* difficult right now.

Teleporting wasn't gentle, and Tim's body was already an indescribable wad of misery, and being shot-putted out of reality by a goth ten-year-old wasn't helping; every inch of him throbbed like he'd been put in a blender and glued back together. His skin crackled with magic, and his limbs spasmed with aborted shifts as they ping-ponged between dragon and human forms. As soon as the transport was over, Tim crashed to his knees and gasped for air. Was the dirt supposed to feel this good?

"Tired already?" the Witch Boy chuckled above him. "Lame. I thought heroes were supposed to be tough. You better not pass out already, that'd be boring."

Tim growled at Klarion. The Chaos Lord just smirked and pet his cat like a two-bit Bond villain. They were in an underground cavern with eerie back-lighting. It was illuminated by a thousand pale crystals, and the walls were glassy smooth. It smelled like dust and minerals, but not any Tim had ever encountered on Earth.

"You suck," Tim said, struggling to his feet. His shoulder shrieked, the spear tip still impaled within it. "Zero out of ten, would not get kidnapped by again."

Getting upright, check. Staying standing? A work in progress. Tim tipped to the side and caught himself on one of the walls, too shaky to keep his balance. His body tingled, like he'd been hooked up to an electric fence. Something wriggled inside him unpleasantly, like a snake that'd crawled into his arteries.

"Thanks! Zero is my favorite number," Klarion said, hopping into the air to float criss-cross applesauce. "It's the easiest to do math with."

"Illiterate moron," Tim muttered. "Can't even add numbers."

"I can!" Klarion pouted. "You guys just use the wrong kind. Math makes more sense in the Witch Dimension."

"Nu uh, you're just dumb," Tim said.

Klarion stomped his foot. “Am not!”

“Are to!”

“Am not!”

“Are t—” Tim grit his teeth. Why was he arguing with this chump? Klarion was like, *ten,* if that. Tim was way more mature than this. “What do you want with me?”

It was hard to think clearly. He’d banged his head hard earlier, and the pain and . . . Whatever Klarion had done back in the villains’ HQ . . . Wasn’t helping. It was taking all of Tim’s focus to keep his knees locked so he didn’t French kiss the floor again. He didn’t have the brain space to unravel whatever delusions were going through the magic user’s head.

Klarion floated a few inches higher and stroked his cat with a sigh. “That’s a good question. What do any of us want in this boring, orderly world?”

Tim buried his face against the wall and groaned. “What are you *talking* about?”

Tim was way too injured to deal with philosophy. He’d honestly rather die than ruminate over the intricacies of mortality (or whatever Klarion was). This had to count as torture.

“Pfft, figures you wouldn’t know,” Klarion said derisively. “Little lizard in a well thinks he’s seen every dimension, but you’re living in a drop of the ocean. *Lame.* You wouldn’t know an alternate plane from a black hole it it turned you into spaghetti.”

Tim blinked. He was sure that if he wasn’t bleeding out from being impaled he could make a witty comeback, but the fact of the matter was that he *didn’t* know anything about . . . Any of that.

Whatever. Didn’t matter. There wasn’t time to bicker about magic mumbo jumbo with this creep and his weird cat. Tim needed to get out of here and save Young Justice from the mad scientists living in Mount Rushmore. And then, maybe, if he felt like it, also get to a hospital. Kryptonite

didn’t affect him, but blood loss did. He fumbled for a batarang, looking desperately for an exit. He just had to make a distraction, then he could get out of here.

“Don’t bother running,” Klarion said, snapping his fingers. Tim’s utility belt turned to smoke. “I didn’t make any doors.”

Tim stared at where his belt used to be, eyes wide. Gone, without even an incantation. He swallowed. “Didn’t *make* them?”

The non-euclidean, crystal cave suddenly felt claustrophobic, and the confusing array of crystals far more sinister. Tim wasn’t an African dragon, he wasn’t built to thrive underground. He was most effective in either air or water, but there was barely enough room for him to get airborne here.

Klarion giggled, putting a hand over his mouth. The contours of his face were bizarrely lit, like the light didn’t know how it was supposed to interact with his body. Every hair on Tim’s body stood on end.

“Course not,” Klarion said. “Doors are a human concept. My mantra is ‘don’t need ‘em, don’t build ‘em.’”

Stupid teleporting, magic weirdo from another dimension. This crystal prison of inter-dimensional doom won the award for the least accessible space to ever exist. How was Tim supposed to get out of here now?

The air buzzed with electricity. Suddenly, Klarion was nose to nose with him, hovering in midair like gravity wasn’t real. Maybe it wasn’t for him.

“No way out, no way in,” the Witch Boy said. “No annoying minions to heckle me, and none of your silly friends to get in the way. You and I can have some *real* quality time now.”

“Is that why you kidnapped me?” Tim said, scooting another step back. His instincts were clambering to get away as fast as possible. “To hang out?”

Tim had done worse for less, but it was still a dick move.

Klarion snorted. “Nothing so basic. I couldn’t care less about who you are, just *what* you are. You’re so *weird*. I've never seen a spell weave into someone so well. It shouldn’t even be possible. You’re two things mashed together on perfect scales. I don’t know how you haven’t fallen apart or gone mad from the strain. Whoever wove magic into you knew exactly what they were doing. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't remove it without killing you.”

Tim’s skin rippled into scales for a moment as he bristled. "So why don't you, coward?"

He couldn’t care less about how his magic worked, or who had made it. Tim was more annoyed at the prospect of dying in such am embarrassing way. The only thing more galling than being kidnapped by a ten-year-old was being murdered by one.

But, on that note, if he wasn’t dead yet, there had to be a reason. And where there were reasons, there was leverage. And leverage was the only way he could get out of this alternate nightmare dimension.

Klarion put a hand over his heart and acted like he’d been shot. “Robin, you’re supposed to be *smart.* I’d never waste rare magic like that. Dead is *boring.* I can have way more fun with you alive.”

Alarm bells blared in Tim’s head. Normally, *he* was the one who played with his food. This was an inversion of the natural order. Even worse, Klarion wasn’t even going to eat him, so there wasn’t even a good reason for this.

“What kind of fun?” Tim said, weighing his options. He could pull the kryptonite out of his shoulder and stab the Witch Boy, but then the blood loss would get to him and it’d be game over for Robin. If Tim was very, very lucky Klarion wouldn’t let him die, but that wasn’t a comfort. He had a feeling dying was one of the nicest things that could happen to someone a Lord of Chaos set his sights on.

Klarion dropped his cat to steeple his fingers. The tabby meowed as it landed feather-light and unbothered by the rules of physics. Tim’s fingers twitched. How he hated that animal. It’d be so easy to eat. Just one chomp—

“My eyes are up here, lizard boy,” Klarion said.

The Witch Boy snapped his fingers again and—oh, there was the pain again. Like Tim’s blood was replaced with gasoline and lit with a match. Tim collapsed in a heap of bones and misery, all thought gone. He was used to pain. Growing up with Janet—then following that up with a couple years as Robin—had seen to that, but there was a difference between getting punched or lightly stabbed on patrol and having his body convulse as his muscles and bones rearranged themselves beneath his skin. That was—no, this was *wrong,* shifting wasn’t meant to hurt—it hadn’t ever before this—what was—

After several minutes of white-out agony, Tim stopped seizing. He lay in a loose fetal position, ears ringing so loudly he could barely hear anything. Klarion had his feet on the ground now, cat curled around his ankles as its master hummed curiously.

“I’m having trouble picking what to do with you,” Klarion said. “There are so many fun options. I could make you be *all* dragon and forget you were anything else. Or put you full of magic pins and strings so you move like I want. Or stick you in a bottle and tell people you’re a genie so they open it and get chomped. Oh! Or how about I make you eat your team? That’d be funny, wouldn’t it?”

Tim peeled his face off the ground and growled, long and low.

“Touch them and I’m dropping rule three,” Tim said. Smoke curled out from between his teeth as venom pooled in his mouth. The tips of his fingers became claws as he shifted onto his knees. *Nobody* would be hurting Young Justice.

Klarion just giggled. “*I* wouldn’t be touching them, silly. That’s what you’re for. You know, I like this plan. It’s got drama and flair. I haven’t had enough of that lately. Those science nerds are *boring.* It’s all calibrations and tests and blah blah *blah*. I came to this pocket of reality for fun. I’m wasted in the lab! Improv is my destiny.”

Klarion did a few steps of a tap dance to sell that line, and did jazz hands to cap it off. He looked free and innocent, so long as one avoided the red delight in his eyes that promised mayhem and horror.

Tim’s temper flared. Banked under layers on contentment and distraction was a furnace of wrath he rarely tapped into. Jack had made sure both Tim and Janet had tight grasps of their fight instincts,

but right now Tim wanted to throw that training to the wayside. He could brush off any amount of violence on himself, but attacking people he cared about was off-limits.

Just as strong though—and to Tim's surprise—there was another reason he was mad. It was braided with frustration, and a sting of hurt.

"You can't do this," Tim said. "They don't even know I'm a dragon. It's not *fair."*

Tim had been excited to break it gently to them. It was going to be good communication and everything. He didn't want them to hard feelings about his prank. Kon was the one who thought he was a vampire at the first Young Justice meeting, it'd just spiraled from there. Tim didn't mean anything bad by it. But if their first introduction to his dragon form was him stark raving mad and trying to eat them, grudges could and would be held.

"They don't *know?"* Klarion sounded like he couldn't decide from being excited or horrified.

"No, and you'll ruin everything!" Tim fumed. "I've been baiting them forever to see when they'd figure it out, and you'll just give away my secret like that? It'll spoil all my fun!"

Never mind that the joke was as dead as Jason had been. Tim wanted to tell his team the truth, but not like this.

Klarion blinked, clearly expecting a different response. "Fun?"

Tim focused on retaining vocal cords that could make human sounds. It was pretty hard. Given how much he was shifting. "Duh. Gaslighting them is the funnest thing ever—aside from hunting. You're supposed to appreciate a good joke. That's your whole shtick!"

None of these were the real reasons Tim was so upset, but Klarion didn't need to know that. Tim doubted he'd ever had a genuine friend in his life (the cat didn't count). He wouldn't understand how hard it was to decide to share something personal, then have that opportunity snatched away like the last pickle in a sandwich shop.

Klarion floated in place thoughtfully. "That is true, I do like laughing… but which is funner, watching your plan unfold or inconveniencing you?"

"The first one," Tim said, deadpan. "They've been rolling Nat 1's on perception the entire time I've known them. If you're really a being of chaos like you say you are, then you understand how rare that is."

Most people would have clued in that *something* was different about Tim, but Young Justice's basis for normalcy was more twisted than a pretzel factory. The mental gymnastics they went through to convince themselves he was run-of-the-mill human were comedic gold. Mentally face-palming at their obliviousness would keep Klarion entertained for years.

Klarion floated a few feet in the air, stroking Teekl with a thoughtful expression. "This does intrigue me . . . And messing with your magic would be tricky anyway. You're as much magic as you are human and dragon. Mess up that balance, and you'd be toasty roasty."

"Great, good to know." Tim doubted it was the kind of magic that resulted in cool spells or lightning bolts. He wished Klarion would stop staring at him like a kid in a candy store. Tim was *not* a delicacy, and he didn't appreciate being looked at like one.

… This was probably how Beast Boy felt whenever Tim stared longingly at him. Tim didn't like that comparison. He threw that observation into the "don't think about" box to be repressed for eternity.

"Think of it this way," Tim said, gathering the tattered remains of his dignity. He hated negotiating for freedom like this, but eating Klarion didn't seem to be an option. "You keep my secret and continue to harass Young Justice, and you'll get a front row seat to their inability to notice my true nature. All it takes is letting me out of this weird knockoff phantom zone, and you'll have laughs for months."

Please work. Tim *really* didn't want to be stuck here for eternity at the mercy of whatever a Chaos Lord was.

Klarion flipped upside down and grinned like the Cheshire cat. "Okay! I'll help you for now. You're right, it does sound amusing, and I'm sick of evil fuddy duddies telling me what to do. It's time they remembered I have plans of my own."

Tim got back to his feet, swaying from his injuries. His skin ached from whatever Klarion had done to him, but it was a dull throb now. Whatever spell that was hadn't been permanent. His Robin suit was sticky with semi-dried blood, and his head was still fuzzy from getting up close and personal with the floor, but his shoulder was the worst of it. He needed the spearhead out soon, with stitches quick to follow.

"Excellent," Tim said, bleeding relief as well as blood. "So, the exit?"

Klarion brightened. "Oh, those are easy to make. This is just a pocket dimension a few steps to the left—and a couple realities sideways, I guess, if you want to be fancy about it. We haven't even left the room you were in before. Cool trick, right?"

"Mind-blowing," Tim said, eyeing the cat. All these injuries were making him hungry. Maybe once he got back to earth he could eat Teekl. What did Klarion's (way too sparse) file say again? Familiars were somehow important for Chaos Lords, though Tim wasn't sure how.

Klarion raised a hand, fingers about to snap, but before he could, the cavern shook from its foundation and the temperature dropped ten degrees.

Um.

"Is that you?" Tim asked.

Klarion looked at Teekl, then back at Tim, pointy eyebrows arched. "No?"

"Then what—" Tim began.

His question was answered as a blue rift of swirling darkness opened in front of them, howling with the screams of the dead. The pocket dimension buckled as cold grave-scented air slammed into Tim and Klarion, more frigid than a crypt at midnight. Inside the portal, frayed and battered, was Young Justice.

Somehow, they'd gotten out of their magic dampening chains, and they looked *pissed.*

"*You,"* Greta said to Klarion, teeth bared as she held apart dimensions with her bare hands. *"Get away from Robin."*

Klarion opened his mouth, probably to say something witty.

"Guys, no—" Tim said. He'd *just* negotiated safe relief. Literally two seconds was all he needed to be home free.

But listening had never been Young Justice's strong suit. Nobody waited for Klarion's quip or Tim's explanation. Instead, Cissie fired an arrow at the Witch Boy, Lobo dove forward with a snarl, and the rest of the team raised their weapons with brazen war cries and charged.

Chapter End Notes

RIP Tim, he found a peaceful solution for the first time in his life and it was immediately ruined. Somewhere in the distance, everyone who's ever interacted with him feels strangely vindicated.

Wish Granted (Whether You Like it or Not)

Chapter Summary

Tim finds out the hard way what happens when you piss off a Lord of Chaos.

Chapter Notes

Oh hello Hyde how are you doing? I almost used deodorant as toothpaste today, I'm doing great.

Anyway, sorry it's been a hot minute since I updated. You know the drill; finals, holidays, paying off the sleep debt, etc. This break isn't so much a break as it is a chance to brace myself for the coming storm next semester, but I'm glad I found the time to finish this chapter. We are almost at the end of part 4! FINALLY! I'm not going to lie, I've been very indulgent with this chunk of the series, so I'm both excited and sad to see it go. But I've been sharpening my teeth for part 5, and we're only a few chapters away. ;)

Anway, this chapter. Uh . .. *looks at scene.* *looks at fic tags* *looks back at scene* ... *adds the body horror tag*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim had never vibed with fairy tales. For one thing, the heroes always beat the dragons, which was utter bull. Dragons would win in a fight against a human ten out of ten times. But more to the point, Tim didn't see the hype about knights rescuing princesses. In Tim's experience, ladies could take care of themselves. Besides, what self-respecting person would want to be saved? Rescue was for chumps.

But now, as Young Justice burst through Greta's portal frothing at the mouth and raring for violence, Tim's heart was dangerously full of gushy feelings. They came to rescue him? Without being bribed? These were *quality* humans. Maybe those fairy tales were onto something.

Of course, gushy feelings aside, this was a bad turn of events.

"Guys, stop!" he yelled, "peace is an option this time."

Nobody listened. They were in berserker mode.

“Prepare to die, scumbag!” Cassie yelled, winding a punch that’d shatter a skyscraper. “That’s *our* weirdo you’re messing with.”

Klarion eeped and snapped his fingers. Tim made a similar sound as he and the Witch Boy suddenly switched places. Cassie barely pulled her punch as she crashed into Tim and sent them both careening against the wall. Tim’s eep turned into a choked gasp as his injured shoulder took the brunt of it. He suddenly had a lot more sympathy for bugs on windshields.

“Oh frick, Rob I’m sorry,” Cassie said, “are you okay? Stupid question. Are you dying?”

“Debatable,” Tim wheezed. He was suffering, at least. “How did you guys find me?”

The rest of Young Justice was ganging up on Klarion. It wasn’t going well. Bart was fast, but Klarion had turned the floor into either ice or zero-friction matter, so nobody could walk on it. That left half the team on the floor throwing things (and each other) at the Witch Boy while Kon and Greta—the only ones aside from Cassie that could fly—duked it out with him in midair.

“Empress and Secret,” Cassie said, peeling him off the wall. Tim latched onto her arm for balance since his inner ear was in the washing machine. “They used a combination of ghost powers and voodoo to track you down with the blood you left on the floor of your cell. It was pretty cool, but this place took forever to find. Greta said it was only a few steps to the left—and a few realities sideways if you wanted to be fancy about it—but I’m sorry we didn’t get here sooner. You look *awful.”*

“I could be better,” Tim agreed. “But he actually didn’t do much.”

It was mostly just his other injuries (and the aftereffects of whatever spell Klarion had hit him with the first time) that were bothering him. Tim wasn’t a happy camper, but he knew things could’ve been much worse.

“Small mercies,” Cassie said. “Don’t worry Rob, we’re going to get out out of here. Superboy’s going to ask Superman if we can chuck Klarion into the Phantom Zone.”

Speaking of the devil, Kon was thrown the wall next to them with near supersonic force. The impact left a crater in the wall. The sound of a pained grown echoed from within it.

“That sounds like a great idea.” Tim said to Cassie, “but I think Superboy’s the one we need to worry about getting chucked into an alternate dimension.”

Darned Kryptonians, invulnerable to everything except kryptonite and magic.

“Oof, yeah,” Cassie said with a wince. “Hey, SB, get out of there! You and I have a date with the victory bell. It’s round two of our slug fest with Mr. Magic Act, and together we’ve got a shot of knocking him out.”

Kon stumbled out of the rubble and gave two finger guns. “Sounds swell.” His face twisted. “Oh God, I sound like Superman. Someone kill me.”

A purple ray hit him in the chest and threw him back into the wall. Apparently, Klarion was happy to oblige.

Tim whirled toward the fray, eager to get even with the Chaos Lord. Just because he was still impaled didn’t mean he couldn’t show that immature pest a thing or two.

Klarion seemed to have his hands full already. His hands were a blur as he vanished and reappeared in various corners of the room, trying to dodge Greta’s impersonation of the embodiment of wrath. Everything he threw at her phased through her, including his magic blasts, and Greta was filling the entire cavern with frigid, death-scented fog.

“What’s wrong with you?” The Witch Boy yelled. “Just die already!”

“Done that already,” Greta said, a mass of fog with glowing eyes. “You can’t kill what’s already dead, but I can ferry *you* to the other side. Say hello to my brother for me!”

Klarion teleported to avoid getting suffocated in her strangling fog, then hissed as Cissie shot an arrow through his heart. Tim cheered, but Klarion just pulled it out with a pout and disintegrated the arrow. Slobo's attempt to smash his head in was also ineffective, as Klarion just went *goopy* and stitched himself back together. Tim was starting to think Klarion didn't *have* a real body. He was just a magical pain in the ass.

"Give me a sec," Cassie said, patting Tim on his good shoulder, "We'll take care of him real quick, then get you out of here. Just stay tight."

"But I can help—" Tim said.

Cassie took off, followed by Kon. Tim did *not* pout as they left him behind. He was mature, even though he was *clearly* needed. Wondergirl and Superboy were brawlers, not strategists, and the others were just as bad. They needed Tim's brains to win this fight.

Case in point, Klarion's spells were getting sharper and more pointed. His eerie smile had been traded for an irritated sneer, and all his attention was focused on Greta.

"You're so annoying, totally *not* worth the deal I made with Robin," the Chaos Lord pouted. "I hate psychopomps. Good thing I know how to deal with them."

The Witch Boy's eyes glowed scarlet. Tim's hair stood on end as the air electrified like the sky right before a storm broke. Cassie and Kon flew at the Chaos Lord, but he fired a beam of something at Greta before they could get to him. It was a pure gold blast of magic that made scales sprout from Tim's arms just *looking* at it from across the room.

Greta didn't try to dodge. Why would she? Everything went straight through her. Except this. It hit her in the chest and knocked her back like a cannonball. Everyone froze, bug-eyed because *that never happened,* as fog rose off the floor in a mass where she'd landed.

Tim put a hand over his mouth and ran forward, but Anita beat him there. She reached down and grabbed the prone form lying in the pooling mist. Amazingly—horrifyingly—she could touch it.

Greta popped up, wild-haired and panicky. Instead of transparent, she was fleshy and *breathing.* She looked down at her hands and screamed.

“I can’t kill a dead thing,” Klarion cackled, “but you can’t use your powers if you’re alive!”

Tim couldn’t tell whether to be excited or horrified. Greta was alive again? Amazing. But the fact that Klarion did that without breaking a sweat? Bad. So bad. Small children of dubious morality should *not* have access to that kind of firepower.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Klarion announced, crackling with energy. “You guys are *boring.”*

Oh no, alarm bells again.

“Guys, watch out!” Tim yelled, preparing to pounce. But his feet never got off the ground.

Klarion turned into smoke and appeared in front of Tim. He grabbed him by the neck, just like he had in the cell back in the Amazo factory, and lifted him up one-handed. Tim grunted, trying to claw at Klarion’s arms, but his fingers stayed human shaped and *weak.* The Chaos Lord smirked, tightening his grip as Young Justice cried Tim’s name in alarm.

“Forget our deal, that was so ten minutes ago,” Klarion said. Tim’s flesh crawled where the two of them touched. “I’m going to have some *real* fun, no strings attached. Hey, Robin, do you know what I love about balanced magic like yours?”

The air rippled. The walls and ground spun in fractal patterns, breaking and reforming into dizzying arrays of kaleidoscope light. Young Justice shouted in the distance—was it the distance? Physical space was losing meaning. Klarion’s body bled red light as he become the focal point of every crack in reality. Tim dug his human fingers into the boy’s arms and peeled back his lips in a snarl.

“All it takes it one nudge,” Klarion said, “and it falls apart.”

He touched Tim’s forehead with the tip of a pale finger, and everything—

went—

white.

Tim had never given much thought to his shapeshifting. It had taken years for him to master (unlike Janet, who was a quick learner and had been an adult when she'd gotten her second form), but it was purely utilitarian. He was so used to maintaining his human and dragon forms that he usually forgot how much focus it actually took.

It was way harder than he made it appear. Every cell constantly wanted to shift, and Tim constantly had to regulate part of his attention to maintaining his forms. Now, that control was gone. Tim couldn't string two thoughts together without screaming as he was compelled to shift.

Bones snapped and lengthened. His spine grew and shrank vertebrae too fast to register, and his skeleton arched as it tried to rearrange itself into a quadrupedal shape. Tim's back *burned* as he felt wings try to break through his skin but got stuck under his shoulder blades because his torso hadn't grown long enough to accommodate them.

Shouting—there was shouting, and the hand around his throat disappeared. Tim collapsed, arms curled around himself as he tried to make it stop. Fine, this was fine, just a shift gone wrong. He could fix—

He squeezed his eyes shut, but every time he tried to make his cells move a certain way they did the opposite, bucking and writhing against him. There was no sensation except pain.

Somebody was yelling and asking what had been done to him, but Tim didn't recognize the voice. The one that answered, he knew though, because it was the one who'd done this to him.

"I barely did anything," Klarion giggled, "Just made him more comfortable in his own skin. Like what you see?"

Tim screeched as his teeth sharpened. Several extra rows burst through his gums and venom pooled in his mouth. He tried to tweak his jaw to accommodate everything, but his muscles spasmed and he almost bit his tongue off.

“Robin, Robin talk to me plea—”

Someone was holding his face, trying to get him to open his eyes. Tim obliged with difficulty. Cissie was looking at him in horror, her blond hair contrasting with her red mask in a ghastly way. W-Why was Cissie here? Arrowette had retired, hadn’t she? Except this had been the last team mission. Their final get-together before Young Justice was officially over. That’s right, they’d been fighting—

“Klarion?” Tim rasped, amazed his tongue could still form human sounds. Granted, his words had a snakelike rasp, but at least they were decipherable.

“Distracted,” Cissie said. “The others are handling him. We gotta get you out of here.”

There was a boom in the distance.

“’M fine,” Tim slurred, then hissed as his vertebra grew spines that jutted out of his back. “…ish.”

“No, you’re not,” Cissie said. “Just hang on, we’ll find a way out of—”

Another boom. Cissie yelped and flung herself over Tim to provide cover, but all that did was jostle Tim’s everything. Tim didn’t recall the team having access to bombs, so what was making the explosions?

He pulled himself up to his elbows and took in the damage; Klarion was a glowing ball of sadistic glee as he fired energy bolts at the team. Kon was acting as a shield for the squishy humans, but since he was vulnerable to magic he looked as reliable as a pincushion in a fireplace. Bart was using his super speed the best he could, but the fight was too high up for him to be very effective. Cassie was guarding Anita while the voodoo girl was frantically chanting, probably trying to open a portal home. But *Greta* was the one with dimension hopping powers, and she was currently staring at her hands and hyperventilating on the ground, so Young Justice was royally screwed.

Bad. Everything was bad and getting worse. They were going to end up horrifically tortured by a baby Chaos Lord, and if they were *lucky* get rescued by adults later and lectured until the end of time. There was no escape, unless—

Tim's eyes landed on Teekl. the magic cat that was licking its paw while it watching the carnage from a crystal perch on one of the walls. Suddenly, he remembered a footnote in Klarion's file. Lords of Chaos needed anchors to stay manifested, and there was only one thing that Klarion took with him everywhere he went.

Leverage, get.

Tim stopped fighting the transformation, but his body didn't stabilize like he'd hoped. His bones kept stretching into a half-dragon monstrosity, continually breaking down and rebuilding itself into a barely functional form. This was *very* big problem, but Tim didn't have time to freak out about it. He just had to do what he did best; the three rules didn't count on animals.

He pounced, keeping his bad arm close to his chest (he was *still* impaled) and snapped his elongated jaws at Teekl. The cat managed to avoid being bit in half, but Tim swiped his good hand and smacked it clear across the room, where it hit the wall with an irritated "mrrp!"

Klarion's gasp could've drowned out an orchestra.

"You!" The Chaos Lord yelled at Tim. "What kind of monster are you, hurting a poor defenseless kitty cat?"

Tim didn't stop to banter. He was shaky from blood loss (transforming into a bigger body wasn't helping) and his limbs couldn't decide what length they were. He let himself arch into an even more uncomfortable shape, stretching his body as far as it could go, and dodged a beam of magic the Witch Boy threw at him.

"Bad dragon, you're getting disintegrated now," Klarion said, moving to snap his fingers.

"Disintegrate this, you frackin' loser!" Slobo said, jumping onto Klarion's back and biting the hand Gollum style. Several fingers came off (Klarion looked more shocked than hurt), and Kon and Cassie both latched onto his legs.

Teekl's smug eyes widened as Tim leapt at her. He opened his mouth, which finally got the picture and transformed the rest of the way, and bit down. Hard.

Annoyingly, Teekl didn't taste good at all. There wasn't even blood! She just puffed into mist and vanished with an annoyed meow. But Tim knew he got her, because Klarion *howled.*

Kon, Cassie, and Slobo fell to the ground as Klarion flickered like Greta used to. His body bubbled and writhed like it was full of worms, and Tim swore he saw fractal patterns skitter across reality as a tear formed in the universe. Wherever Klarion came from was calling him back.

"Oh, I was too nice with you," Klarion hissed. The only solid parts of him left were his eyes, which were locked on Tim. "I'm going to remember this, Robin. Even if you survive this, you'll never get away from *me."*

He snapped his fingers a final time and vanished. Everything else did too.

The crystal cavern they were in shattered into a million pieces of light, and Tim and Young Justice fell, but there was no gravity pulling them down. Rather, it was like being put in a washer on the spin cycle, then yanked in every direction simultaneously.

Tim saw a thousand reflections of reality fly past, all warped and blurry. Time and space was a taffy puller trying to tear him in half, and all Tim could think about was that stupid old *Wizard of Oz* movie as he wished desperately to go home.

Moments later, Tim landed spine first on the ground, dazed and confused. His body was almost completely dragon, although his wings still hadn't fully formed. The half-solid bones trapped by his shoulder blades felt like rebar jammed under his skin. He needed to get up, but that was asking a lot. He just lay there, blinking as his insides did their best to become his outsides, stunned because somehow he wasn't dead yet.

Where was—? He recognized those ceiling lights. He'd seen them before. Recently. Like, an hour ago. But why were they red? And what was with the sirens?

A loud intercom voice broke through the haze. "FINAL COUNTDOWN INITIATED, ALL PERSONAL EVACUATE THROUGH DESIGNATED EXITS. EXPLOSION WILL BEGIN IN

FIVE MINUTES. I REPEAT, EXPLOSION WILL BEGIN IN—”

Tim jackknifed upright. He couldn’t move right because too many parts of him were the wrong length, but that didn’t matter. He could ignore the pain somehow. If he didn’t, he’d be worm food in a giant stone president’s head.

They were back in the Amazo factory in Mount Rushmore, stranded in an empty hallway that was suspiciously void of said Amazos. Alarms blared, repeating the evacuation order, and Tim didn’t know if Klarion had sent them back here on purpose or if they’d rebounded to their home dimension because he’d been decorporealized.

Young Justice was on the floor by him, shaking their heads, dazed as well. Greta sat up, hair a haystack, and made a confused noise when she didn’t phase through the floor.

“Why’s it noisy?” Bart said, trying to rub his eyes through his goggles.

“Oops,” Greta said. “That was my boop. I pressed the wrong button.”

If Tim could talk, he’d be choking, though he wasn’t sure if it’d be with laughter or panic. Classic Greta. If she hadn’t been a ghost when she did that, he would’ve made a joke about her death drive. Or maybe he still could? Irrelevant. They’d all be dead if they didn’t book it in the four minutes and thirty seconds they had left.

Tim got to his feet and growled as he tried to force himself to shift completely dragon. Magic danced across his scales, biting him with electric zaps that burned with alien fire. His limbs buckled, then solidified into almost their proper shape. There were far too many patches of skin for comfort and his ribs were the wrong proportions, but same difference. He could *move.*

“Rob—*Rob,* it’s us!” Cassie yelped as Tim grabbed her with his tail.

“Don’t eat us, we’re friends not food!” Anita said, flailing as Tim snapped his jaws around her waist.

Bart seemed to clue in what Tim was doing, because he shoved Cissie and Greta onto the dragon's back and gave a thumbs up.

Tim ran on three legs, the injured one pressed against himself as he dashed through identical corridors. Cassie strained against his tail, but didn't fight too hard, probably to avoid hurting him. Behind Tim, Kon was yelling as he tried to catch up, dragging Slobo with him while Bart sprinted ahead in a blur of red light.

"Robin, slow down," Cissie said, "you're—"

Tim crashed into a wall, then the opposite corner as his inner ears shifted back and forth, throwing his balance off-kilter. He left a thin trail of blood behind him because the stupid spearhead couldn't even stab him well enough to keep the liquid inside his body.

"Robin, over here!" Bart yelled, reappearing at the end of along corridor. "There's a bank of windows!"

"TWO MINUTES REMAINING" The automated system said.

Tim coiled, then bolted, straining against Klarion's spell as it dug deeper into his body. Spots danced across his eyes in a thousand colors, and his world honed into the cold tiles under his feet and the ache inside him that winched tighter and tighter until it felt like he'd break.

Just a little more. Just two minutes more. He could hold out. He had to. His friends depended on it.

Tim hit the wall as he tried to turn the corner. The impact almost knocked the wind out of him, but Tim could see the windows now. An entire wall of them was overlooking the Great Plains in all their stark beauty. It was more hopeful than a staircase to heaven.

"*THIRTY SECONDS REMAINING."*

Bart jumped onto Tim's back and stuck there like a burr. Kon, grappling with a struggling Slobo, locked eyes with Tim then nodded.

“Let me go!” Cassie said, squirming. “I can fly too!”

Kon became a bullet as he punched through the glass, leaving a hole behind him. Tim leapt after him, wincing as stray shards of glass scraped against his scales. The patches that were only skin stung with new cuts.

“FIVE SECONDS REMAINING.”

Tim started to fall, but with the rest of his willpower he forced his body to do one last shift. It was like swallowing a bag of nails, but his magic finally listened.

Wings burst from his back, ruby red and strong. Tim carried himself on an updraft as fast and far as he could get himself to move. He gained altitude rather than distance, aiming for the clouds. His muscles shrieked from holding this form, eager to mutate into something else. Maintaining this shift was hard—too hard. He couldn’t—it was already breaking apart, like Tim himself was unraveling. What had Klarion said earlier? He could make Tim forget he’d even *been* human. But he hadn’t had time to cast *that* spell, did he?

Mount Rushmore exploded below him, shooting shrapnel and debris into the sky like a volcano. The shock wave hit him seconds later, at dense as a brick wall. Tim fell off course, then kept falling.

The fiery wreckage of the Amazo Factory beckoned to him. Tim wasn’t like Klarion. Physics were something he had to obey, even if they sucked.

Tim’s eyes flickered. He couldn’t hold himself together anymore, and he didn’t think his shoulder injury had liked shapeshifting very much. He didn’t have enough blood for his dragon form . . . Or his human one, actually. That was bad, but at least Young Justice was safe. Sure, they were screaming and flailing as they fell with him, but they’d be okay. Cassie and Kon could fly, and Slobo was whistling for the Supercycle. They’d get out of this in one piece.

As for Tim? Well, a nap was sounding good right now. Hopefully it wouldn’t be a permanent one, but that’d depend on whether someone caught him. Tim’s consciousness faded, and he was gone before he knew whether or not he’d hit the ground for a final time.

Chapter End Notes

Tim *unconscious*
YJ *screaming*
Kon: What do we do? Oh my god, what are we supposed to do?!
Bart: Um, let him sleep?
Tim *writhes as magic continues to wreck his body*
Kon: We need an adult! An adulty adult! Where's the nearest zeta tube?!

Creature Comforts

Chapter Summary

The fallout from Klarion's happy fun time is not happy nor fun for Tim.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year's everyone! May the next 365 days be both survivable and enjoyable! 💖

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was official, Tim hated magic.

“Calm down—Rob, stop!” Kon said desperately.

Tim snarled and flung Superboy off him with the shake of his tail. Kon squeaked as he hit the med bay wall, but he wasn’t hurt. Kryptonians made excellent rag dolls. The others yelled in annoyance but didn’t get closer. They’d learned to keep their distance after Tim nearly bit off Anita’s ear.

In Tim’s defense, he wasn’t trying to hurt them. But he was in a lot of pain. His self-control was at an all-time low.

Another zigzag of agony made him seize. He arched his spine as bolts of magic bubbled his flesh and stretched his bones. Scales and skin traded places, and Tim wasn’t sure where his dragon form ended and his human one began.

If he was the crying sort, he’d be bawling. Fortunately, Tim still had his dignity intact, although the team wasn’t letting him crawl off to lick his wounds in peace. No, they wanted him to stay here for “medical assistance” and “adult help.”

Tim glared at the Watchtower walls with loathing. Stupid tin can in space. He wanted to kick it into the sun. If he hadn’t been unconscious, he totally would’ve stopped Young Justice from dragging

him to the nearest zeta tube to access the JLA med bay. They'd managed to bandage his shoulder while he was unconscious, but getting a blood transfusion or IV into him was impossible since his body was currently rearranging itself like the beads inside a maraca. So, now he was a shapeshifting ball of pain *and* dizziness.

"Rob, just hang on, help is on the way," Cassie said, running over to squeeze Tim's hand—er, claw. Everyone else stayed out of biting range. "Bart's looking for another Lord of Chaos to undo the curse, and Cissie called that Agent A guy in Gotham. They'll know what to do."

Tim stopped writhing to stare at her. He'd wondered where Bart was, but the second half of that sentence was more concerning. Young Justice had called Alfred? That wasn't good. Because wherever Alfred was—

The door flung open, revealing a frazzled Batman. "Son!"

—Bruce was never far behind.

"Hey Mr. Dark Knight," Kon said nervously. "Um, Rob kind of got—*oof!"*

Bruce didn't hesitate before shoulder-checking Superboy out of the way and rushing toward Tim. Cassie let go of his hand so Bruce could take it. Tim's favorite human looked like he was about to implode with emotions.

Tim scrunched his snout as he focused hard, and managed to make his claws turn mostly back into fingers. It felt like being bit by a dozen fire ants, but it was worth it. Bruce was distressed, which meant he needed comfort. Physical touch with squishy human limbs usually accomplished that.

"What happened hurt? What the hell went wrong?" Bruce barked, squeezing Tim's hand.

The team flinched, but Tim purred and nuzzled his human. Aggression? On his behalf? He liked that. Bruce was winning lots of hoard points.

While the team stumbled through an explanation of the fiery death of Mt. Rushmore and the fall of the Amazo factory, Tim finally let himself stop struggling. He seized with icky, nasty magic and his body felt like it was in the business end of a taffy puller, but Bruce was here. That automatically made this a thousand times better.

"Impulse is still looking for another magician like Klarion. Isn't that Doctor Fate dude one of them? Maybe he can reverse the spell?" Cissie said, looking up from where she was sitting with Greta, who—now alive and human once more— was still staring at her fleshy hands in awe.

Bruce shook his head. "Even if you found him—which I doubt you will, since he's an extra-dimensional creature capable of teleportation—it would be too difficult to force him to undo this. He dislikes meddling with anything because it interferes with the 'balance.' Tell Impulse to reroute to London. One of our allies there can hopefully solve this."

"Right, okay." Cissie thumbed her comm.

Tim hoped Bart wasn't running too fast to pick up reception.

***

Fifteen minutes later, Bart barreled into the room like a tropical storm. Dragged in his wake was a disoriented, drunk blond man in a smelly trench coat. Based on the empty flagon he was white knuckling and the beer plastered on his shirt, Bart must have grabbed him from a pub mid-drink.

"What the bloody hell were you bollocks thinking when—what the hell is that?" the man said.

Tim squinted up at him, eyes foggy with misery. He'd given up trying to control his shift. Now he was a tangle of scales, skin, twisted limbs, and petty irritability. It was too loud and bright, and his teeth kept melting.

"Robin got transformed!" Impulse said, shoving the smelly human closer. "You're the chosen one, you have to fix him."

“Chosen?” the man barked. “I got kidnapped!”

“Constantine,” Bruce growled, finally getting his Batman persona on properly. “We’re in need of your assistance.”

“No fucking doubt about that.” Constantine said, inching closer to Tim with a look of revulsion. “That is *nasty*.”

Everybody in the room made a grab for something to throw.

“I meant the spell,” Constantine snapped, dodging the bedpan Cassie chucked at him. “Gods, you lot are protective. Don’t worry luvs, I can fix whatever the hell this thing is.”

Tim suspected Constantine wasn’t talking about the spell with that last comment, but he was magnanimous enough to overlook that for the time being. He really, *really* wanted to be fixed.

Bruce cradled Tim’s head while Constantine poked and prodded him. The magician’s hands were electric, and each brush against his scales made Tim growl. His throat burned with fire. He hated being helpless. The next time he saw Klarion he was going to bite his head off. Anybody who could put Tim out of commission so quickly was too dangerous to live.

After ten minutes, Constantine sat back on his heels. “Whoever cast this knew exactly what they were doing. Gotta hand it to you, Bats, your bitty baby knows how to make enemies.”

“What does the enchantment do?” Bruce growled.

Constantine pulled a soggy cigarette out of his pocket, blatantly ignoring the No Smoking sign on the wall. “Reverses magical flow. Any control your boy had got flipped. All those handy little ways he kept himself the right shape are actively hurting him now. If you want to compare it to something, Klarion essentially made his blood flow backward, cheeky blighter.”

Tim growled. ‘Cheeky’ didn’t cover it.

Bruce tensed, hand tightening around Tim's horns. "Fix it."

Constantine blew a drag and snuffed the cig on his coat. "No need to blow a gasket, handsome. Like I said, whoever cast this was good, but I'm better. You'll get your kid back to his scaly self in no time."

Young Justice looked at each other in confusion. Tim was just relieved the agony would finally be over.

At least, he was relieved until Constantine rolled his sleeves up, spread his fingers across Tim's flank, and *yanked* with his magic.

Tim took it back; there was one thing worse than getting this spell cast on him. Getting it removed was a thousand times more awful. As soon as this was over, Constantine was *so* dead.

***

By the time Constantine stood, shaking the remains of Klarion's spell off his hands like a spiderweb, Tim was a sweaty, noodly mess. Nobody had warned him that messing with his internal magic felt like getting his nervous system tied into sailor knots and thrown into an acid vat. He hated this. Magic officially sucked. He wanted to rip it out of his body permanently.

Unfortunately, that would kill him. Constantine was very clear about that. Tim's bodies were held together by a very specific enchantment that was impossible to recast, and if it got removed it was gonzo bonzo.

"Dead?" Cissie said, eyes wide. "Rob almost died?"

"Correcto," Constantine said, eyeing the bottles of medical alcohol with consideration. "Do not pass Go, do not collect $200, do not live to fight another day. The only thing your reptilian friend would be is worm food."

Bruce squeezed Tim's now-human shoulders like a vice. Undoubtedly, there would be many updated contingency plans and anti-magic seminars in the batcave to make sure that never happened.

"But you fixed it?" Kon said, wringing his hands. "Rob's not going to die anymore, right? The magic is gone?"

"He's fine," Constantine said, kicking the medical cot. "Helluva thing to be whammied with, but I'm good at what I do. He'll be sore a few days, then be back to terrorizing national monuments like God intended."

"God never intended anything with me," Tim muttered, slumped against Bruce. "I'm a lawless existence."

"Sure, brat," Constantine said.

Tim bared his teeth and hissed, but it didn't sound as intimidating now that he was human shaped.

Bruce ruffled Tim's sweaty hair. His stoic mask was back, but Tim could tell he was relieved. Poor, silly human, worrying about Tim. There was no need to fuss. If Tim had died that was his problem, not Bruce's.

"Thank you for answering the call," Bruce told Constantine.

"I didn't get a bloody choice," the magician reminded him.

Bart beamed in the corner. Tim gave him a shaky thumbs up.

"Um."

Everyone looked over. Greta stood on shaky feet, pale and unsteady. Anita and Cissie hovered next to her to catch her if she fell. Everyone was getting whiplash from suddenly being able to touch

their former ghosty friend.

“You said Robin has another spell on him,” Greta said. “What is it?”

Oh yeah, Constantine had been pretty vague about what exactly Tim’s latent magic had been doing. He’d summed it up as Klarion messing with something that had already been there, but didn’t specify *what* it was.

Tim’s team turned their gazes to Constantine like he was a lifesaver in a hurricane, desperate for answers. On the other hand, Bruce’s face was twitching.

“You didn’t tell them?” Bruce said to Tim.

“Nope,” Tim said smugly.

“Why?” Bruce said, years of suffering in his voice.

Tim allowed himself a pleased purr, even as the others looked at him in confusion.

“Tell us what?” Cassie asked. “Rob, have you been cursed this whole time?”

“No,” Tim said. “Not cursed. Don’t be weird about it.”

Young Justice still looked confused. Just to mess with them, Tim yawned with all his teeth. The pointy, dragon ones. Shifting wasn’t pleasant—Constantine was right, he was *sore*—but unlike earlier his body did what it was supposed to. Teeth sharpened, his tongue forked, and Tim’s jawbone rearranged without issue. It was as familiar as it was easy, just like it was meant to be.

The team stared at him, their own jaws on the floor. The looks of betrayal were expected—the person they were directed at, not so much.

“You bastard,” Kon said, flinging himself at Constantine. “You said you fixed him!”

Constantine yelped something Latin, which flung Kon into the same wall Tim had shoved him into earlier. “I did, you little asshole. Where’s the gratitude? I can’t believe this.”

Tim’s friends exploded into shouts of confusion, mostly aimed at Constantine. They were calling him a two-faced liar that couldn’t even do magic properly, and wanted to sue for not fixing Tim like he’d promised. Bart ignored them and zipped to Tim’s side, poking his face curiously.

“No scales?” the speedster said. “Booooring. How do you even know you’re better if you only did the teeth?”

Tim nipped at his fingers, then relaxed against Bruce. Bart had a good point.

The yells got louder as Tim shifted back into dragon shape. It felt like using a pulled muscle, so it was hardly pleasant, but *he could do it* and that was enough for Tim. Klarion’s nasty enchantment was actually gone.

As soon as he was all the way dragon again, Tim wrapped himself around B with glee. He was about twenty feet long now—which was big for his age, take that heightists—and that made it easy to coil around his favorite human like a snake. Bruce sighed as Tim started gnawing on his vambrace, trying to scratch the polish.

“You’re a fraud!” Cassie said to Constantine, ramming his collarbone with her pointer finger. “A badly dressed, drunk fraud!”

“I’m going to haunt you,” Greta said to the magician, then looked at herself and growled. “I’ll find a way to do it without dying again, mark my words!”

“You had one job, magician dude,” Kon said, gesturing at all of Tim. *“One!”*

Tim rolled his eyes, unable to laugh in his current shape. Silly friends. They were a special kind off oblivious. He should probably try to correct them, but Bruce was scratching his head right between

the horns and Tim *really* didn't feel like moving. It'd been a long day, and this was fun to watch.

"Robin is a dragon hybrid," Bruce said with the grace of someone resigned to the guillotine. AKA, communicating Tim's situation to everyone. Again. "It was in the JLA newsletter last year. Hardly a secret."

"The JLA has a newsletter?" Cassie said. "And people *read* it?"

Tim snorted. He'd been telling Bruce print media was dead for years, but he'd never believed it. But this explained why Young Justice had never been in the loop. Figures it was the Bruce Boomer Wayne's doing.

"Who cares about that," Anita said. "Tim, why didn't *you* tell us?"

Oh, they wanted a *conversation.* Ugh, annoying. That meant he needed a mouth capable of speech.

Tim shook himself like a wet dog, shrinking his vertebrae down to the human amount and rearranging all his parts. In a couple seconds, he was back to his smaller than average Tim size, stripped down to only his under-suit so the bandages on his shoulder could staunch the blood (getting it one while he'd been half shifted had been a nightmare since the bandages kept fusing into his shift. But, they were doing their job, so ha).

Bart zipped over to Tim, standing next to him with a nervous but supportive smile. Tim remembered how anxious he'd been about his team being in the know; well, that ship had sailed and caught on fire. Good thing Tim's concerns had too.

The guilt he wanted to feel about his secret being outed in this sucky way was on the back-burner. Tim was too woozy from blood loss, magic, and being yeeted through multiple dimensions to be anything but relieved now that it was over. Who cared that his secret wasn't secret? He was still in one piece and got to cuddle Bruce. As far as Tim was concerned, that was a win-win. The relief at being known trumped everything else.

"Surprise!" Tim said, spreading his arms. "Get wrecked. I fooled you so good."

There was a moment of silence as everyone stared at him. Constantine with an unimpressed grimace, Bruce with resignation, Bart with a conspiratorial grin, and the team with various levels of shock.

Tim cackled. It had been worth over a year of gaslighting to see the looks on their faces. Tim wasn't one to value money, but this was priceless.

***

If Tim had a nickel for each time he'd surprised people with his draconic heritage, he'd have a lot of nickels. What made this time special was that he'd done it on purpose.

"Part dragon," Tim clarified after the initial screams and yelling died down. "I have some human DNA deep, deep down, but it's easy to ignore."

Bruce had said "dragon hybrid" but Tim wanted to make it clear which species was more important (and, more importantly, cooler). Plus, Young Justice needed to hear stuff a couple times before they retained it.

Bruce gave him a look. "You're half and half."

"Semantics," Tim said. It didn't exist if he didn't acknowledge it. Jack's advice to accept both sides of himself was also waved away. Besides, if his human DNA wasn't as dominate as his scaly genes, it was a homo sapien skill issue and therefore none of Tim's concern.

"So you've got a human parent and a dragon parent?" Kon said, then gasped. "Of course, it all makes sense now. Drake, like dragon. It's not even *subtle.* We're idiots."

Tim nodded. No need to argue that point. Slobo had figured out in seconds.

"I can't believe it," Kon continued. He paced the room like a detective about to reveal the killer at the end of a murder mystery. "It's so simple, it's brilliant. Kudos to your dad for choosing that last name. Hiding in plain sight takes guts."

Tim looked up from where he was scratching Bruce's vambrace, which was now decorated with claw and teeth marks. "What are you talking about? My dad's human. The last name is a complete coincidence."

From the looks his team was giving them, Tim was starting to understand why Janet was more or less a hermit. She hated people's collective stupidity.

"So, the pretty lady we saw at the PTA meeting was . . ." Anita began.

"Yup," Tim said, familial pride filling him to the brim. "Dad accidentally turned her human a couple decades ago, but she can still shape shift. Isn't she awesome? She's my role model for everything, especially my human act. I learned it all from her."

And Jack too, he guessed, but Janet deserved extra praise since she was genetically opposed to raising children and did a stellar job anyway. Out of all the dragons in the world, Tim doubted he'd find a better one than his mom.

"Dude," Kon said, looking at Bruce with wide eyes. "You married a *dragon?"*

There was a moment of silence. Tim had to check to make sure he hadn't shifted his ears wrong.

"No, he didn't," Tim said, looking from Bruce to Kon in alarm. "Batman isn't my dad."

"Yes, he is," Cassie said slowly. "My mom has his email."

Several other teammates nodded. Tim recalled the PTA meeting. Oh, yeah. Huh. That was a misunderstanding.

"I am not married to Janet Drake. Please never insinuate that again. Jack would murder me," Bruce said. Then he sighed and took off his cowl.

Instead of silence, the room was filled with collective screams. Greta tried to do something with her powers, but they weren't there anymore so she shoved Slobo toward the bed like an attack dog while the others either crossed themselves or looked for something to throw at Bruce.

"Who the hell are you?" Kon yelled. "Begone, demon!"

"Why do I recognize you?" Cissie said in horror. "Oh God, I saw you in a tabloid. You swam in a fondue fountain!"

Somehow, that made the screaming even louder. Bruce looked like he was considering death as a valid way to get out of a conversation.

It took a few more minutes to settle down Young Justice and emphasize that Batman was *not* Tim's dad. Bruce looked oddly dejected by the end of the conversation, but Tim had to put his foot down about this. Jack alone earned the dad card, Tim wasn't going to hand that out to anyone else. Nobody should have that kind of authority over Tim *ever*. It went against his biology.

"So, just to recap?" Constantine said, starting a new cigarette. "Your mom is the shapeshifting hell lizard with a penchant for violence?"

"Yeah," Tim said proudly. His mom was the best. Constantine was good for recognizing that.

"Nice," Constantine said. "Those types get my motor going. Mind if I pop in to keep her company sometime? If she's happily married, your old man can tag along too."

All of Tim's good feelings fell off the face of the earth.

"Stay away from my parents!" he hissed, shifting his teeth to attack Constantine. The only thing that stopped Tim from biting his arm off was Bruce yanking him back by the scruff and yelling for the magician to shut up and get out.

"Bloody hell, fine, you prickly bastard," Constantine said, halfway out the door. "Give me a call if she changes her mind."

Tim screeched louder. A lick of flames escaped his mouth. Bruce had to put out the bed sheets.

Tim only calmed down once Constantine officially left. He was adding the magician to his list of humans to eat on sight. He already had to put up with Jack and Janet's gross romantic ickiness at home, he wasn't letting more of that into his house (even though Janet would rather eat her own wings off than look at someone other than Jack, and vice versa). Tim wasn't taking any chances.

The next twenty minutes was spent answering questions from his teammates and getting shaken by the shoulders when they weren't happy with his answers. Apparently, gaslighting them "for fun" wasn't a good reason, and they wanted payback.

"Impulse kept a secret too," Tim reminded them. "You forgave him."

"Only because he wore the cone of shame," Kon said.

Tim did *not* want to wear the cone of shame.

"I'll give you unlimited dragon rides for life instead," Tim said. "We square?"

They whispered among themselves, then nodded.

"We accept the terms," Cissie said. "But you're the worst."

"I know," Tim said happily. "It's great."

He'd gladly be given the menace label if it meant getting to mess with his team like this.

Bruce cleared his throat. Everyone jumped. Despite the black cap, silly animal ears, and thigh high boots, Batman was good at disappearing in plain sight.

“You can continue questioning Robin later. For now, I think it’s best he rests,” Bruce said, helping Tim get to his feet.

Tim was shameless enough not be be embarrassed about draping himself over his favorite human like an old coat; standing was hard and walking wasn’t worth it. He wanted to sleep until the turn of the decade.

“Oh, sorry,” Kon said, wincing at the bandages on Tim’s shoulder. “Feel better, Rob. I still owe you for saving me from getting impaled.”

Tim made a confused sound. He’d do that for anyone in his hoard; repayment wasn’t necessary. Silly Kon.

“Hey, don’t think this isn’t over,” Cassie said, jabbing a finger at Tim. “You owe us more explanations as soon as you’re better.”

“And rides!” Greta said excitedly.

“Yeah, and rides,” Cassie finished. “We are *so* hanging out for dragon rides.”

Tim felt another purr building in his chest. For once, he didn’t have to suppress it around them, so he gave into it. “Okay, sounds great. I’ve been wanting to take you guys flying for months. I was making it *so* obvious what I was, but you never noticed.”

Bruce muttered something about remedial awareness training, which made Young Justice wince.

“Bye guys,” Tim said as he let himself get dragged out of the med bay. “See you around.”

“Bye!” everyone called back, then went back to bickering among themselves about who knew what.

Bruce nudged him into the teleporters, but Tim was dragging his feet, too tired to go very fast. Walking wasn't fun right now. Being forcibly shifted multiple times made his nerves finicky, and his upper body throbbed from his injury. Even so, Tim was smiling.

He was glad the secret had finally been revealed. It'd been fun playing with his team's perception of him, but it was more satisfying to be completely known. Rather than listen to his inner chaos gremlin, he should have done this a year ago.

"Don't tell Dick," Tim said as Bruce gave up and threw him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, "but he's onto something with communication. Sometimes, it does pay off."

"I know," Bruce said with a shake of the head. "Isn't it terrible?"

They shared a wry smile as they left the Watchtower. Then Tim went home to get babied by his overprotective hoard and field a panicked phone call from Jack and Janet.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Tim told all of them once he was snuggled into bed with his favorite snacks, a comfort nature documentary, and his parents' worried faces on a video call. "It's just a flesh wound; not even a big deal."

The looks he got from everyone were dubious at best, blatantly disbelieving at worst. Janet even asked if he wanted her to kill Klarion for him, which was dumb because Klarion wasn't even on this plane of existence anymore . . . Though it was sweet. *Too* sweet. What little blood Tim had left was all in his cheeks.

"I just told you I'm fine," Tim said, hiding his blush with a scowl. "Stop coddling me."

But he let them fuss over him anyway and stayed on the call for a couple of hours so Jack could make sure he wasn't lying. Sometimes, dragons had to make sacrifices like that in order to be a good hoard keeper.

Not that it was *much* of a sacrifice; just this once, Tim was happy to be babied. It was . . . nice . . . knowing so many people cared.

Chapter End Notes

Anita: So, follow up question, why is your name Tim?
Tim: Why is this a question?
Anita: Because you are a fire breathing reptile with wings, and your mom and dad decided 'Tim the dragon" was dignified.
Tim: For your information there is a ton of significance around my name. Lore you would not appreciate, in fact.
Anita: Such as . . ?
Tim: …Timothy was the name of one of the translators in the Merriam-Webster English-Chinese dictionary back in the 90's.
Everyone:
Anita: This tells me nothing.
Tim: Yeah, you wouldn't get it.

(Tim is not wasting his oxygen rehashing his parents' dumb inside jokes. It's bad enough he has to live with the aftermath.)

No Longer Just Us

Chapter Summary

Young Justice wraps up their time together. Meanwhile, Cass makes an unpleasant discovery.

Chapter Notes

Eagle-eyed readers will notice there is now a part 5 to this series. That is because I have no self-control. Oh well.

Title is a reference to the Young Justice comics, where the team's original name was "Young Just Us" but a reporter misheard it and wrote an article about "Young Justice" to Bart's utter annoyance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Klarion incident was both a good and bad thing. Tim was thankful that despite being highly painful, vaguely traumatic, and extremely dangerous, that the experience had made it impossible for this friends to be mad at him. It was much harder to hold a grudge about keeping a secret when Tim had been magically tortured the moment someone had figured it out. So, thanks Klarion. He sucked and Tim hated him, but at least almost having his essence ripped apart by the magical menace had been a way to speed-run any potential friendship drama.

Luckily, recovering from the magical strain was going well. Constantine was right, Tim was sore all the time and needed extra sleep, but there weren't any permanent side effects. After a weekend camped out on the couch playing video games he was back in action, much to the local criminal population's distress.

"Did you know my goons want hazard pay if they run into you on patrol?" Jason said at dinner. "Catwoman let slip you ate her cats, and now everyone is even more unnerved by you."

"Really?" Tim was delighted. "Awesome!"

Jason's eye roll was torn between exasperated and amused. "Not awesome, Timmy. The more obvious you are, the more likely someone will finally figure out you're a rare magic hybrid. That is

not a good thing."

"I'm not scared of traffickers," Tim said. "I'm mighty."

"Sure," Jason said, still exasperated.

It was Tim's turn to roll his eyes. His claims of battle prowess were generally seen as "cute" and "endearing" by his silly humans. He wasn't appreciated nearly enough for being an apex predator.

Of course, there were upsides to not being feared; Tim liked being liked by his hoard. Ironically, Young Justice was way more comfortable around him now that they knew he was a dragon. Tim thought that was funny, but it also made him purr with satisfaction. His humans had good taste.

They also liked that he purred. Silly humans.

It was funny, actually, how many sounds he could make around them now. Tim was used to shushing himself in public, so it was a nice change of pace to chirp, cheep, and growl whenever he wanted around the team. Transforming at will was also a nice perk. He should've outed himself ages ago.

It was too bad that the team was disbanding. He'd have liked more time to be himself around all of them at once.

***

Cassie Sandsmark, the girl Wonder, lived on the third story of a small, three-bedroom Manhattan apartment. The building was Gothamesque in its dirty bricks, rickety fire escapes, and tight corridors. Naturally, Tim was a big fan.

Of course, since it was a home designed for two people, it was currently very cramped. Fitting all of Young Justice inside was a work in progress, but as long as Tim didn't transform nobody would

be squished.

“Okay, okay, settle down,” Helena, Cassie’s mom, said as she shooed her daughter out of the kitchenette. “Food will be up soon. Stay out of my hair.”

“But the chips and dip—” Cassie began, only to be tackled by Greta from behind and hauled into the small living room.

Tim was perched on the arm of a couch, watching as his friends fought for the cushions and booed at the movie options. Kon was sprawled in the middle of the love seat, nodding excitedly at whatever Cass was telling him. Cissie and Steph were by the window arguing about costume designs. Anita, Greta, and Slobo were now by the DVD player, heads together as they seriously debated which Halloween movie had the best fake gore. Bart, meanwhile, had dipped out for a minute to see if he could steal a time machine and buy snacks from the 31st century to share. He was determined to show them how marshmallows evolved over the next thousand years.

“This is a madhouse,” Cassie said, hopping over the back of the couch to sit by Tim. “I should never have volunteered to play hostess.”

“I think your mom’s doing most of the work,” Tim pointed out.

“She made me clean the house,” Cassie said. Nearby, Kon crunched loudly on a tortilla chip and sprayed chips everywhere. “And I’m going to have to do it again once this is over.”

“There there,” Tim said, patting her head. Cassie’s hair was starting to get longer. It had a fun bounce. “Such is the price we pay for greatness.”

Young Justice’s farewell party wasn’t the fanciest event they’d thrown, but it was the most important. Now that more than half the team was depowered (Greta) or retired (Anita and Cissie), it felt like a good time to end this chapter of their lives.

Tim wasn’t thrilled about that, per se, but he was glad he wouldn’t organize an op and be upset when only three people showed up. Young Justice was going to keep in touch, but it made more sense to stay long distance friends than anything else. Cassie, Kon, Bart, and Tim were the only ones who were staying in the hero game full-time (Slobo was a neutral party at best, and wanted to

explore the universe with the supercycle). Tim could stay happy knowing that the Core Four, as they called himself, still had skin in the game, and that they were the ones Tim was most emotionally attached to as well.

Anyway, Tim had tried to nominate Wayne Manor as the party location, but Bruce was still salty about Young Justice thinking Jack was Batman instead of him, so that had been vetoed. Plus, Alfred had said something about Tim's friends being prone to "property damage" and "wanton destruction," and didn't want the manor trashed more than usual. Luckily, Cassie had come in clutch, and now everyone was sardined in her apartment.

"I'm just glad we could get everyone together," Cassie said. "Thanks for inviting Spoiler and Black Bat too, by the way. I haven't talked to them nearly enough."

"They're cool," Tim said. "If you ever want to team up with them, you totally should."

Cass would love having two minions for her shenanigans, and Steph seemed to be on good terms with everyone by now, rodeo drama long forgotten.

"I'll keep that in mind," Cassie said. "Thanks for sharing your hoard."

"I'm a generous dragon," Tim preened. He didn't think Cassie totally understood how precious hoards were yet, but she'd figure it out eventually.

"Hey guys, I'm back," Bart said, zipping through the front door in a blue of red. (Tim made an aborted move to pounce and barely caught himself. Cassie gave him a dry look.) "Check it out, limited edition Doritos!"

"Weren't you going back to the future?" Kon said, grabbing a fistful of chips.

"What? Oh yeah," Bart said. "I got hungry and forgot. By the way, is dinner ready yet?"

"No!" Helena yelled from the kitchen. "Ten more minutes, then you can have your Bagel Bites."

Everybody groaned. Waiting for snacks was worse than water torture.

***

Ten minutes later, Helena appeared out of the kitchen, and had to beat Young Justice off with a metaphorical stick so she could put the food on the table. It was gone in seconds (thanks, Impulse), and she sighed as she put a batch of frozen pizza in the oven.

"I can eat it raw it it's easier," Tim said, slumped over Bart's head while the speedster stayed relatively still. "Cold pizza is tasty."

"Absolutely not," Helena said. "I don't care what you are, that's a culinary sin."

"Agree to disagree," Tim said. Cassie had apologized for accidentally telling her mom that he was a dragon, but Helena seemed chill with it. Food was the only line she drew in the sand. "Mom says tomato sauce is best when its an ice block. It's like eating a frozen carcass in the tundra."

Helena set the oven timer, face scrunched. "Yes, that does sound like something Janet would say. You really take after her."

Tim beamed. That was the *highest* compliment.

"Hm," Helena said. "Now you look like your father."

Tim's smile turned into a scowl. Jack was a squishy, emotional human with zero common sense and no survival skills. Tim resented the comparison. He was way mightier than his dad.

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask if Jack has taken a look at that sketchy anthropologist I tipped him off about," Helena continued. In the living room, sounds of teenage socializing could be heard, most of which included screaming and hyping up someone to lick a battery. "I think they're involved in the black market."

“Mom, for the last time, Batman isn’t Tim’s bio dad,” Cassie said, scooting past to pull a soda out of the fridge. “Bruce Wayne is the dude in the mask. Mr. Drake is just an eccentric rich guy who married a giant lizard.”

“Very funny,” Helena said. “I can buy Jack Drake being the Dark Knight, but Mr. Himbo? That’s ridiculous, he probably couldn’t even lift a fifty-pound box. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

Tim wondered if Helena was simply in denial or had some weird way to reconcile Jack’s very public life abroad with Batman’s constant presence in Gotham. It was amazing what lengths people went to fool themselves about something extremely obvious. Delulu really was the solulu.

“Okay, everybody, we’ve decided!” Kon said, appearing around the corner. “We’re going to watch Wendy the Werewolf Stalker.”

“We watch that *every* time,” Cissie groaned.

“Exactly,” Bart said as he dragged her and Tim back into the living room, “why mess with the classics?”

“Plus, we have the episode you co-starred in,” Greta said, holding up the limited edition DVD Tim had got on an auction online. “You’re a movie star, Arrowette. We have to praise you!”

Greta continued waving the DVD around. She seemed to love grabbing, holding, and messing with physical objects now that she wasn’t dead.

“Pop her in,” Slobo said, putting an arm around Anita’s shoulders. He’d been flirting with her for a while, but Anita actually seemed to like it. Tim wasn’t going to ask. “I want to see blood and guts.”

“It’s rated for TV. You’ll be disappointed,” Steph said. “Come to Gotham sometime and I’ll show you *real* violence. Cass can help.”

Cass smashed her knuckles together and grinned.

Cassie and Tim squeezed onto the couch, but it was way too cramped. Tim grumbled, then decided if he had to be squished *everyone* deserved to be squished.

“Hey! Get *off,* scaly boy,” Steph said as Tim transformed and draped himself over the entire couch and the love seat next to it. “My ribs—I can’t feel my ribs.”

Tim made zero effort to change his position as he wrapped the end of his tail around Bart’s ankle (who was laying on the floor). His goal of covering every surface was a success.

Several people complained, someone threatened to doodle on Tim’s scales with dry erase marker, and Greta giggled in delight at the sensory input she finally got to feel. The DVD menu loaded, and Tim felt a purr build in his throat. All these people he liked in the same place felt too good to be true. The only thing that’d make it better was if the Waynes and his parents were there too.

“Aw, that’s adorable,” Helena said as she stood in front of the TV.

“Mom, stop blocking the view!” Cassie said.

“I’ll be out of your hair in a second. Hold still,” Helena said, pulling out a phone. She snapped a photo and smiled. “That’ll be a good one for the scrapbook. Enjoy your flick, kiddos. Pizza will be out in a few minutes.”

On her way out, she ruffled Cassie’s hair, which made Wondergirl blush. Beside Cassie, Cass touched her own head and frowned.

Everyone cheered as the show started and Cissie—dressed in civvies for her guest role—appeared onscreen. Tim let out a satisfied purr as someone absently started petting his side, and made sure to nuzzle the nearest team member affectionately.

“Check it out,” Steph said halfway through the episode. She shoved her phone in his face and showed him the picture Helena had sent to everyone.

Young Justice was crammed onto a couple couches, squished so tightly that Anita couldn't even use her arms. Snacks and empty solo cups were littered on the floor, and Impulse was mostly a ball of fuzzy hair from where he was slumped on the ground. Tim lay stretched across everyone like a big, scaly cat, staring at the camera with predatory interest while everyone else made goofy faces.

"I think she got my good side," Steph said. "Best photo ever."

Tim rumbled his agreement. He was totally printing it out and putting it in *all* his vigilante albums.

***

The party ended around midnight. Half the team carpooled to the nearest zeta tube, but Tim had promised to fly Steph and Cass back to Gotham, so they took the bus to an isolated part of town where he could take off. Cass was unusually broody on the bus. Tim ignored it for a while, then felt an irritating flutter of concern.

"What's stuck in your craw?" he asked.

Cass blinked at him slowly.

"What's wrong?" he said, making a mental note to teach her the idiom later. "You seem sad."

Cass leaned against his shoulder as the bus rode over a pothole. Her head almost hit his jaw. "Thinking."

"Don't hurt yourself," Steph said.

Cass flicked Steph's arm with a huff. "Speak for self."

They disembarked and headed toward a dark, shady side of town. Tim laced his fingers in Cass and Steph's hands so he wouldn't lose them. It was tricky business, keeping track of these sneaky humans.

"Don't have a mom," Cass said as they walked over the sidewalk. The sun was just starting its descent.

"Hmm?" Tim said.

"Wondergirl's mom make—*made*—me sad," Cass said, kicking a pebble on the ground. "Know dad, not mom. Everyone else has one."

"Not Kon," Steph said.

"True," Cass said. "But Kon doesn't want one."

Tim frowned, then nodded. Luthor had more or less made Kon allergic to parental units.

"You don't need a mom," Tim said. "They're optional. So are dads. You actually got the childhood I was supposed to have, and you thrived."

Cass snorted. "Not dragon."

"You'd make a good one," Tim countered, although he was glad she wasn't one. It'd suck not being able to hoard her. Tim's brain hurt trying to think about that. "What about Babs? Babs is mom-adjacent."

"Yeah," Steph said. "She's even got the mom-glare mastered."

Cass made a so-so motion. "Also mentor, sister, and Dick's girlfriend. Weird relationship."

Touche.

“I’m surprised Wondergirl’s mom is what got you so moody,” Steph said. “Tim and I have moms too, you know.”

“Yes,” Cass said. “Jealous of that too, I think. Weird. Don’t like this feeling.”

“I can relate to that,” Tim said. He squeezed her hand tighter. “Feelings are the worst.”

The three of them got to the edge of the woods. Tim’s skin itched to change. He’d been having more trouble staying person-shaped lately. The allure of being not-human was growing stronger, and he’d almost lost his shift a couple of times in the last week. He blamed Klarion.

“If you want, B can help you find your birth mom,” Tim said as he prepared to shift.

“Good idea?” Cass said, hope coating her voice.

“Nope,” Tim said. Bats and parents were a disaster waiting to happen. “But as long as you promise not to run away to Ethiopia and get blown up, I think it’ll be okay. But that won’t happen. Your mom is probably awesome and perfect. The odds of you and Jason both having evil moms are slim to none.”

Cass nodded, frown turning upside down as excitement took over. “Okay. Sounds good. Let’s give it try.”

***

Tim, Cass, and the Waynes stared at the batcomputer screen with various levels of incredulity. They’d put Cass’ DNA the system just to see if there was a match, but hadn’t expected anything to show up.

Lady Shiva's face, paired with her laundry list of crimes against humanity, was an unpleasant surprise.

"Well, slim to none isn't zero," Tim reasoned.

Cass' face twitched.

"At least you know she's bad now, and not, like, in a warehouse with the Joker," Jason added. "It could be worse."

"I'm sure she's got a great personality," Dick said.

Cass spun on her heel and punched the nearest screen. It cracked and shorted out in a fizzle of sparks.

Everyone gave her a wide berth as she stomped out of the Batcave. She was so angry that Tim swore he saw phantom images of a little black storm cloud over her head.

"That went well," Bruce said.

Everyone stared at him.

"I was being sarcastic," he said.

"Good," Dick said. "I was worried you'd finally lost the rest of your marbles."

Tim poked the computer screen, dismayed and slightly confused. He knew Cass didn't want a villain mom, but on the other hand Lady Shiva seemed pretty cool. With a rap sheet like that—and a reputation as the world's greatest fighter—there was no better mom in the world (aside from Janet).

“I bet she’d be fun to maim,” Tim muttered, then saw how his family was looking at him. “As a *bonding* experience. Yeesh.”

“This family, man,” Jason said, shaking his head. “None of us are allowed good parents.”

As the resident poster child of a healthy, happy family, Tim was offended.

“I had good parents,” Dick said.

“They’re dead,” Jason shot back. “Doesn’t count.”

“Damn,” Dick said.

Bruce clapped his hands together. “Focus, boys. This isn’t a joke for Cass.”

“I know, old man,” Jason said. “But what are we supposed to do about it?”

“Remind her that family is by choice, not blood,” Bruce said. “And talk her out of running away from home like you did.”

“*Dude.”*

Tim tuned everyone out, too busy finding similarities between Shiva’s profile picture and Cass. They had the same smug slant to their smile, like the world was their oyster and they’d just figured out how much they liked seafood. It was too bad they disagreed about killing, but Tim and Cass also had moral differences. Maybe she and Shiva could have a good relationship too.

Tim still didn’t fully understand the human desire to stay close to their parents, but he was accepting and magnanimous. If Cass wanted a relationship with her mom, he’d be supportive.

And if she decided to burn that bridge, that was also fine by him. Tim would gladly help set it on fire.

Chapter End Notes

Tim: Cass gets a mercenary dad and a battle junkie mom who likes to fight people to the death? *jealous dragon noises*

Meanwhile, Cass is breaking into Bruce's room to borrow his angsty music CDs to brood in proper Bat style.

As for Young Justice, I've really loved writing them, but I'm about to throw myself into a river because I genuinely do not enjoy writing scenes with that many characters. Cassie, Bart, and Kon will continue to show up, but the other members of the team won't be making any more onscreen appearances for the sake of my sanity. Greta gets her canon ending (becoming human again and attending boarding school with Cissie) and Anita is stepping back from vigilante work for the time being to raise her parents after they got deaged. As for Slobo . . . I'm not going to give him his canon ending because I love him and it's too mean, so he gets to roam the universe on the Supercycle and have happy fun times beating up everything that moves. The remaining YJ members will be joining the Titans in the future, like they do in canon, and continue to have adventures together.

I hope you've enjoyed the YJ shenanigans. I didn't expect part 4 to last so long, but it's been a great time. 💖

The Cain Instinct

Chapter Summary

Cass makes a choice, Tim makes a mistake.

Chapter Notes

I thought about waiting a few days to post this, then decided I can do what I want.

Content warning advisory below.

▶ Content Warning

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Waynes said Cass needed time to come to terms with her murderous mother. Frankly, Tim didn't see how that was any different coming to term with a murderous dad, but the Waynes repeated over and over that Tim needed to let Cass process things on her own. The family's job was to be supportive and accepting no matter what she decided to do with this information.

Tim agreed to because he was an idiot, but as soon as Cass revealed her plan, his promise went out the window. Screw acceptance, Tim was against families.

"You can't leave," he said, blocking the door. "That's not allowed."

"Can't stop me," Cass said. "Need to do this."

Tim hissed and tried to make himself look bigger. All the nature documentaries said that was a good way to intimidate opponents.

Dick rested an elbow on Tim's head. "Calm down. This isn't the end of the world."

Cass had broken the news after lunch while Bruce was still at work. It was just her, Dick, and Tim hanging out, but the good vibes were gone now. Murdered and buried.

"It's the end of *my* world," Tim said, shaking Dick off. "Arguably, that's more important."

Cass wanted to leave Gotham to hunt down Shiva. That wasn't allowed. Tim forbade it. He needed his ninja human close. She *couldn't* go.

"Mom needs my fist to face," Cass said. "Brought me into world. Now am her problem."

She smashed her fist into her palm, and Tim's irritation grew. *Now* she was taking the gloves off? Where was aggressiveness normally?

"You're staying here," Tim said firmly. "Hoard doesn't leave the nest."

"Yes we do," Dick said unhelpfully. "You let me and Bruce go on off-world missions, and Jason lives in the alley."

"That's different," Tim said.

"Why?" Cass said, eyeing the door again.

Tim pouted, then slumped. The words didn't want to leave his throat—they were *emotional* and *gross*—but they bore saying. "Their missions are short, but I don't know when you're coming back."

Ever since he'd found her in the attic, Cass had been a constant presence in the manor. She left occasionally for dance recitals and missions with the Birds of Prey, but generally Tim got to see her every couple of days. Losing that ease of access filled him with anxiety. What if something happened while she was away? What if she got hurt? What if she was too far away for Tim to protect her? Logically, he knew she was one of the best fighters out there, but logic didn't mean much in the face of his emotions.

Cass stepped forward and gave him a hug. She was warm and smelled like sandalwood. “Don’t worry, little brother. Be back after I kick Shiva’s teeth. Not long.”

“But you don’t know where she is,” Tim said, burying his face in her collarbone. “It could take months.”

Lady Shiva was insanely good at avoiding detection, so tracking her down would take a while. A long while, and Cass didn’t want them to help her. She was making it her personal mission to do everything on her own out of misplaced pride, including detective work and on-site sleuthing, which meant Tim was being abandoned and neglected by his evil, cruel human.

“Need to do this,” Cass repeated. “Now is best time.”

Dick hummed in agreement. “That’s true. We don’t know when your adult hoarding instincts are going to kick in. Leaving later might not be an option.”

Currently, Tim wasn’t nearly as possessive as Janet. He could let his humans leave the city (even though it bothered him), but that wasn’t guaranteed to last. It was only a matter of time before Tim became so overwhelmingly controlling that it became a problem, and Cass wouldn’t be able to do this once that was the case.

“You growing up,” Cass said. “Hard, confusing. Same for me. I need to find her so it stops being the confusion.”

Tim frowned, still refusing to let go. Cass was older than him. By human standards she was *plenty* grow up. She should just stop aging right now so she wouldn’t have to go on this journey of self-discovery. Demanding that probably wouldn’t work though. Tim’s hoard was big on fake concepts like “agency” and “the right to roam.”

“Just promise me you’ll be back soon,” Tim muttered, refusing to let her go.

“Not long,” Cass said. “Unless something happens.”

Tim tensed.

“Which won’t,” Cass continued.

He didn’t relax. Tim was going to be constantly worrying about that from now on. Cass wasn’t allowed to get hurt. If she was, she’d be in *serious* trouble.

Dick joined the hug, resting a hand on both their backs. “Don’t worry, you’ll still have all of us, Tim. We’re not going anywhere.”

Tim grumbled under his breath, refusing to admit that *did* make him feel better. He would have offered to go with Cass, but if he did that, who would look after Bruce and the others? Tim needed to maintain his claim on Gotham, and he couldn’t do it from the other side of the world. If he was only hoarding Cass, he could make that choice (Janet had with Jack), but leaving Gotham meant also leaving everybody else, and Tim’s heart did a funny seizing thing at the thought. He’d *never* been away from his main hoard for more than a week. Even as a tiny, pathetic ten-year-old, he’d stayed within city limits to keep an eye on Batman and Robin constantly. He *couldn’t* leave. What if a rival dragon attacked while he was gone? He’d never forgive himself if he wasn’t there to defend his territory.

“Make sure when you find Shiva you bite her for me,” Tim said, suddenly hating the screechy, territorial side of his instincts. They were making this way more difficult. “She deserves it after taking you away from me.”

Shiva didn’t know she was stealing Tim’s hoard member (temporarily), but it didn’t matter. Vengeance would be swift and merciless. Tim was a generous dragon, but he was also a jealous one.

“Okay, silly Timmy,” Cass said with a smile in her voice. “Will bite her lots of times.”

“Good.” Tim smiled and nuzzled deeper into the embrace.

***

Cass left a few days later, departing on an early morning flight out of Gotham with only a backpack and a few wads of cash. Cass knew how to survive off almost nothing, so she wasn't concerned with bringing any earthly possessions with her. Leaving them behind was another problem.

"Look after for me," she said, handing Tim a box of the dance trophies she'd won over the summer at her endless dance retreats and performances. It clinked as the numerous medals were jostled. "Keep safe."

Tim nodded seriously, clutching the box to his chest. Cass' hoard was safe in his hands. He'd stick it under his bed, next to his collection of empty Mountain Dew cans as proof of how seriously he was taking this duty.

Bruce, and Alfred were waiting by the car. They'd already said their goodbyes, but Tim was dragging his out. He still didn't want Cass to go.

"Do you really have to leave?" Tim whined again. "I'll take you flying extra if you do. And give you my favorite snacks."

It was a solid bribe, almost impossible to resist.

Cass just squished his cheeks and smiled. "No, baby dragon. Have to beat up Mom for closing."

"Closure," Tim said.

"That," Cass said. "Will fly with you after."

Tim pouted, but let her coo over him. Normally, he hated being babied, but he'd let Cass squish him as a long as she wanted if it meant keeping her here a little longer.

"Why don't you come to the airport with us?" Dick said when it was clear Tim wasn't going to be budged away from Cass. "It's a long drive. We could use the company."

“Okay,” Tim mumbled, and let himself be nudged into the car.

He curled next to Cass in the backseat the entire way to the airport, trying to memorize her scent for when she was gone. Dick cooed something about how adorable the two of them were and took a few photos.

At the airport, it took another twenty minutes for them to detach Tim from Cass, and he spent the rest of the goodbye tucked under Bruce’s arm so he wouldn’t tackle her. By the time she got through security Tim had a thundercloud over his head. It didn’t go away, even after she landed in Morocco hours later and sent him smiley face texts. They weren’t nearly as good as her real smile. All they did was make him miss her more.

“Man,” he heard Dick say to Alfred later, a few rooms away and a floor below, “if he’s this clingy now, those separation issues are going to be a nightmare later on.”

“Quite,” Alfred replied. “Though I daresay, I do not mind being treasured so much. It is quite endearing.”

“Tell me about it,” Dick said. Tim could hear the smile on his voice. “Now, where did you put those live mice? I’m going to surprise him with a treat. Maybe some hoard time with us will cheer him up.”

***

Despite Dick’s attempts, Tim’s mood didn’t improve over the next couple days, even with the Waynes spoiling him rotten with yummy snacks and excessive hoard time. They said they understood how hard this was for him, but Tim didn’t want to be understood. He wanted Cass back. December arrived in a flurry of gray clouds and slushy snowflakes. The dreary coldness was a direct parallel to Tim’s emotional state.

Now that Cass was gone, Tim had dropped his dance classes. He didn’t see the point in continuing them without her (especially ballet, since the only one he knew there was Charlotte, and she was still obnoxiously friendly). Tim had tons more free time now, but without his ninja human to spoil

he was at loose ends. Most of the time, he ended up laying prone on the floor in dragon form, tripping his humans when they accidentally stepped on his tail.

“ . . . Do you want to stay with Jason for a few days?” Bruce asked over the weekend.

It was common knowledge that when Tim got sad about not having a human close, snuggling the resident zombie was the best cure. Jason had been dead and came back, so his presence stopped Tim from catastrophizing. Plus, he made great food.

“No,” Tim said, still prone on the ground, face pressed into the carpet. “I want to brood.”

“This isn’t brooding,” Bruce said. “You’re moping.”

Tim gave a half-hearted hiss.

***

Even worse than being in the gall of misery was that Tim couldn’t even mope properly since he still had to go to school. The semester only had a few weeks left, but Tim was checked out. Cass was *gone,* how did anyone expect him to pay attention to calculus?

He planted his face against the desk, arms around his face to block everything out. He was halfway through the school day, but it might have well have been an eternity before he’d be free. His classmates chattered around him, obnoxiously excited for the holidays. Poking out his own eardrums with a screwdriver sounded more tempting with every passing moment. He’d even take his social studies teacher’s droning over this.

“Did you hear that Cass Wayne is abroad?” A girl said.

Tim’s ears twitched.

“Yeah,” One of his classmates said, a jock who sat a couple chairs away from Tim and always smelled like air freshener. “Good riddance.”

What?

Tim sat up, suddenly awake.

“Micheal, be real,” the girl said. “There were rumors she was going to get an internship with the Gotham Ballet Troupe. I was so excited to see her perform. She’s supposed to be really good.”

A couple other girls added their agreement and brought up one of the competitions Cass won last month. Tim almost smiled, except that would’ve been showing an emotion around humans he didn’t care about.

“Big deal,” the jock—Micheal—said. “She’s a freak. Apparently, she can’t even talk. Dancing is probably the only thing she knows how to do.”

Tim’s fingers slowly closed into fists.

“Hey, take that back!” one of the girls said. “She’s an icon and I love her.”

“No, she’s a nepo baby,” Micheal said. “I bet Wayne bribes the judges at those contests. There’s no other way that retard could have won without his help—”

Tim stood up, grabbed his Chromebook, and smashed it over Micheal’s head. Then, while his classmates screamed in surprise and fear, Tim pounced.

He didn’t bother to transform, but his fury was in every way draconic, and his human teeth were still plenty sharp. Every ounce of pent up anger and frustration had a target, and by the time Tim was done with this guy, Micheal would regret being born.

***

The principal stared in disappointment at Tim.

Tim glared back.

“This is very bad, Timothy,” the principal said. “Do you understand? This crosses far too many lines for me to dismiss. You’ll be lucky to get away with just a suspension.”

“He deserved it,” Tim muttered.

It had taken five football players and a teacher to pry Tim off, and Micheal had been taken to the infirmary. He had a concussion and enough bruises to cosplay a a grape, so he wasn’t getting lectured. Lucky prick.

“That’s not what this is about, Timothy,” the principal said. “We will talk about Micheal’s ableist comments and offensive language later. Right now, we need to focus on you. Physical violence is never an appropriate solution.”

Tim hunched in his chair, swallowing an angry growl. She was wrong, violence was the *best* solution. It hadn’t failed Tim’s species *ever*.

“Your family is one of our best donors,” the principal continued. “Gotham Academy wants what’s best for you, Timothy. *I* want what’s best for you, but you need to work with us too. I’m going to assign you an anger management counselor. You will attend sessions with them three times a week. As long as you’re cooperative, I can try to keep you enrolled—”

“No!” Tim said, jumping to his feet. “I’m not talking about my feelings with some shrink!”

He would literally rather claw his own skin off. His head was *his* business, everybody else needed to butt out.

“This is non-negotiable,” the principal said. To her credit, she didn’t look intimidated by the death glare Tim was aiming at her, which was a testament to how long she’d had to deal with him as a student. “My job is to make sure you leave this facility with an understanding of how society works and the decency to respect your peers. Temper tantrums won’t get you out of this.”

“I’m *not* throwing a tantrum,” Tim said, stomping his foot.

The principal started to say something else, but the door slammed open and bounced off the wall. Dick marched inside without a greeting. He was still in uniform and had a wild look in his eyes.

Well, crap.

“Mr. Grayson,” the principal said. “Thank you for joining us. I was just talking to Timothy about __”

“Sorry teach,” Dick said. He grabbed Tim by the arm and dragged him to the door without pausing. “Got to go.”

“Mr. Grayson!” The principal said, sounding shocked.

Dick waved without turning around and kept moving. Tim stumbled after him, equally surprised. No banter or socializing? No awkward laughs and vague explanations about Tim working on his issues at home? Dick must be *really* mad.

Tim grimaced. He could already sense the lectures coming. Jack would be bad enough, but he really didn’t want to deal with Bruce and Dick laying into him. Tim hadn’t killed Micheal, wasn’t that good enough? He’d deserved way worse than a concussion.

“Whatever she told you is biased and unreliable,” Tim said, hoping to minimize the damage. “You can’t trust her. She’s a part of Big Education trying to put me in the youth counselor pipeline. I wasn’t even *that* violent.”

“Tim, I literally do not care,” Dick said, kicking open the front door. His jaguar was parked haphazardly on the curb, still running. “Whatever happened today is the last thing on my mind.”

Huh?

Tim climbed into the car and barely got his seat belt on before Dick peeled out of the parking lot, hands tight on the wheel. Now that Tim took a closer look at him, he didn’t look angry. Dick seemed *grim*.

“What’s wrong?” Tim said, starting to get worried. “Is someone hurt? Was there another Arkham breakout? Did Bart almost break the timeline again?”

“No, nothing like that,” Dick said. “It’s . . . Damn, I can’t explain. Read this.”

He pulled his phone out and threw it at Tim. It took a second for Tim to remember Dick’s passcode, but once he input it an article popped up onscreen. None of the words made sense.

Tim trilled in confusion, then realized it was Portuguese, not Spanish, and mentally switched languages. However, when he untangled the words they might as well have been Greek. He stared at the screen, unsure whether he was dreaming.

“Is this real?” he asked.

“Unfortunately,” Dick said tightly.

Tim clutched the phone tighter, feeling weightless in his shock. On the old, crummy iPhone Dick refused to replace, Janet Drake’s photo had been uploaded to an article in a local Brazilian newspaper.

BILLIONAIRE’S WIFE SUSPECT IN MURDER

Below was a brief summary of how Janet Drake had been discovered standing over a freshly murdered corpse. Her photo, taken as she'd been arrested for detention by the authorities, showed that everything from her teeth to her white dress had been covered in blood.

Chapter End Notes

You guys have no idea how excited I've been to post this cliffhanger.

Meanwhile, Cass:

leaves airport
follows a lead
drops her phone off a skyscraper
Cass: ...Oops? But it will be fine. Good phone case.
phone is run over by a train and crushed into a thousand pieces
Cass: Uh oh.

Mum's The Word

Chapter Summary

Tim and the Bats try to figure out what happened to the Drakes in São Paulo, but answers are hard to come by--especially when Janet won't talk.

Chapter Notes

Status: Not actively dying, but it's been a rough week. I'll spare you the saga since it boils down to extreme stress and anxiety, but suffice it to say "AAAAAAH!"

Anyway, Thank you for all your awesome comments, they really helped me get through the week. I'm super pumped to keep posting. Just know that even if I slow down, I love working on this fic and hearing from you guys. 💖

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next two days of Tim's life could be summed up as chaotic, but that wasn't doing it justice. The news were lit up with theories about the murder accusation like it was Christmas and the Chicago Fire at the same time. Gotham and São Paulo's headlines had Janet Drake highlighted, bolded, and put on the front page for the world to see.

None of that would've mattered if Tim hadn't been panicked out of his mind. He'd grown up with one rule hammered into his brain, and it was *don't get the family in trouble.* This definitely counted as trouble.

He threw himself into finding out what went down in São Paulo with the desperation of a starving coyote. Bruce stayed by him the entire time and took over keyboard smashing when Tim needed a break (which was mostly when his caffeine boost wore off and he fell asleep next to his favorite human).

Unfortunately, so far investigating was useless. All Tim had were more questions and a ton of anxiety. Tim had looked through the official news stories about the incident, but they were vague and unhelpful. No doubt, some of that was due to Jack bribing the press and local law enforcement, but it made painting a clear picture of events hard.

The facts were thus: Jack and Janet had gone to a gala hosted by a potential investor for Drake Industries in São Paulo. Somehow, Jack and Janet had been separated. Ten minutes later, Jack and said investor found Janet in a nearby hallway, standing over the bloody remains of a waiter she'd decided to murder with extreme prejudice. The police had her in a holding cell as a suspect for twenty-four hours before a combination of Jack's quick thinking, some circumstantial evidence, and local corruption got her out of the clanker.

So, on the bright side, Janet wasn't in jail anymore. Yay! On the other hand, everything else was bad.

Bad bad.

Although it wasn't confirmed, it was obvious that Janet totally killed that guy. Her MO (mauling) was all over the crime scene, not to mention her DNA. The only reason she wasn't already declared guilty was because Jack had managed to pay someone to burn the evidence at the police station and forensics lab, which bought some time but not nearly enough.

Janet was only out on a temporary release, so if other evidence turned up (or Jack's bribes to the local officials weren't enough) she could still get declared guilty, which meant jail. Which meant Jack would have to commit a crime to be put in the same cell as her and Tim would only be able to see them beside a Plexiglas wall in a Brazilian prison, and that was *not good.*

An even worse alternative would be Janet escaping jail and going back to the wild. Then Tim would never see her again—which was fine, obviously. Tim wasn't *attached* to her. It was just, well, Jack would be lonely if he didn't have Janet go everywhere with him, and Tim wanted his dad to be happy. Tim's fake emotions had nothing to do with anything. It was logic—pure, unadulterated logic—that made him want to keep Janet in his life.

So, the threat she suddenly wouldn't be? *Bad.*

Tim had experience with uncomfortable situations, but usually when there was hot water *he* was in it. Tim wasn't used to something not his fault still affecting him.

Now, Tim sat at his desk, biting his lip as his parents argued onscreen. It had been two days since Janet had been released from detainment, but things were still tense. This was supposed to be a phone call to catch Tim (and by proxy, the Waynes) up to speed, but it was tense. Very tense.

His parents weren't yelling, but Jack was one wrong word away from losing it. His temper didn't fray often, but Tim was always nervous when it did. Anger he was fine with, but when Jack got upset he tended to cry, which was *not* okay. Meanwhile, Janet sat beside her husband, arms crossed as she fumed silently, enduring Jack's passive-aggressive rundown of everyone he'd had to bribe. The Drake fortune had taken a hit.

"You're um, not getting put back in jail, right?" Tim said when there was a break in the conversation.

"No," Jack said tersely. He ran a hand over his face. "I was able to get the heat off us with a dozen hefty bribes and promoting someone who should *not* be promoted, but there are still government officials breathing down our necks. My friend will pull some strings to get Janet off the suspect list, but we probably can't come back to Brazil for at least a decade."

Tim winced, recalling the many archaeological digs Jack had wanted to fund down there. No wonder he was pissed. Well, aside from the murder. That also wasn't good.

"Well, there's always Columbia," Tim said diplomatically. "And plenty of other cool countries you can visit."

"This isn't about that, Tim," Jack said. His voice was harsher with the bad connection.

"Right. Sorry," Tim said, contrite.

It wasn't like Jack to be so snappy, but Tim knew he was under a lot of stress. Janet wasn't helping, since she refused to talk about *why* she'd killed the waiter. She hadn't even told Jack.

The current story was that Janet had stumbled on the body and tried to perform CPR, which was why her clothes and face had gotten soaked in gore. There had been a mysterious figure leaving the gala around that time, so the authorities were turning their investigation onto them, but Tim had no doubt in his mind that Janet had totally killed that guy. He just didn't know why. The building the gala had been in used security cameras only for the main rooms, and even those were recorded on VCR on a closed circuit. Accessing them had been difficult, and they hadn't told Tim and the Waynes anything new.

“Did that guy . . . Do anything to you, Mom?” Tim asked, unsure what tone he should use. Worry? He should sound worried. Except this was Janet, and he didn’t have to be worried about her because she was strong and awesome and could take care of herself. So why did his stomach twist at the thought of something bad happening to his mother? That wasn’t normal.

Of course, nothing about this was normal. Janet hadn’t even tried to break out of jail. She’d gone *quietly* and waited for Jack to get her out the human way. It wasn’t like her. Maybe Tim should be worried. Just a little.

“No,” Janet said, glaring at the floor.

“Are you sure?” Tim said, looking to his dad for guidance. Jack was better at knowing how to pry information out of people.

“She’s sure,” Jack said, glaring at his wife. “Apparently, this is just a game for her. Nothing like a murder trial to top off the year, right Janet? Our lives are just fun and games for you.”

“I did my best,” she hissed.

“You *ripped his throat out,”* Jack said.

“He deserved it,” she muttered.

Tim blinked, feeling a bizarre sense of deja vu.

“That’s not—we have *rules* about this,” Jack said, taking a deep breath. “You’re putting everything at risk. Not just me, but our son. Think of Tim.”

“I’m okay,” Tim said quietly. “Everything’s fine.”

“*No,* it’s not.” Jack stood and ran a hand through his hair. “I—I need some air.”

He stalked off camera. Tim heard a door slam, and Jack was gone.

Well.

That wasn't good. Jack almost never left Janet alone.

"Should I, um, call back later?" Tim said. This was supposed to be an emergency family meeting to keep Tim updated on the Drake family madness, but this felt like actual madness, not normal shenanigans.

"That might be best," Janet said, picking at a piece of lint on one of her sleeves. "Your father's emotions are intolerably volatile at the moment. It will take at least a week for him to calm down. Silly creature."

"Yeah . . ." Tim said. Very silly. The silliest. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Janet had amazing self-control. She wouldn't lose it without a good reason, especially in such a public place. But she also wouldn't hide that reason from Jack. That went against her personality. Something was wrong.

"I'm fine," Janet insisted. She pursed her lips. "It simply needed to be done."

"Why?" Tim said.

Janet glanced at the door Jack had exited. Her usually inexpressive face pinched unpleasantly. "I'll tell you later. I don't trust the phones."

She cut the call, and Tim decided to be officially worried.

***

Unfortunately for everyone, no answers were found over the next few days.

The Waynes were also at a loss over the Drake fiasco. Granted, Tim hadn't told them Janet *was* guilty of murder (except Jason, who was cool with it), but it didn't take a genius to figure out. But the Bats, like Tim and Jack, were baffled because they didn't know *why* she'd done it. As far as they could tell, the waiter Janet had killed had nothing to do with any crime syndicates or mercenary groups. It was beyond odd.

Babs was trying to dig up more dirt on everyone the Drakes had spoken with over the last few months to glean a motive, but all she found were legal business ventures and several plans for tours of the Brazilian wilderness. Tim had to explain that Janet loved tracking down different dragon sub-types, including the (presumably) extinct feathered dragons of South America. Sadly, Jack and Janet hadn't been able to find any traces of them, so they were either really good at hiding or had all died off when the conquistadors brought over all those diseases. Either way, it was a dead end for the investigation, and didn't tell anyone why Janet suddenly got the munchies for waitstaff.

"Maybe she was just really hungry?" Jason suggested on a night when everyone was investigating together in the Batcave.

Tim just gave him a look. "Don't be stupid, Jason. He wasn't in nearly enough pieces. She only wanted him dead."

Sure, she'd been caught quick, but Tim knew his mother. If she'd wanted to eat that person, she could've transformed and ripped him in half. None of this throat-ripping nonsense.

Thinking about that just made Tim worried again. His stomach was queasy from the stress. Janet had never slipped up like this before. This entire situation was confusing and a little bit scary.

On the next family video call, Tim poked his mother for answers again, but she refused to give him any details. She was on an anti-technology kick and didn't want to tell the "electric boxes" her secrets. Jack also hadn't been able to get her to crack. The only bright side was that now Jack was at least much calmer.

"I'm sorry for snapping last time," Jack said to Tim. "You didn't need to hear that. I thought I was fine, but clearly I need to do more qigong and meditation. This has been a very stressful week."

“Thanks, Dad,” Tim said, “but it’s okay. I like it when you’re mad. It’s better than crying.”

Tim knew how to process and handle anger better than other emotions. It seemed like there were a thousand different ways to deal with someone who was upset or sad, but if you chose wrong it did more harm than good. Someone spitting sparks because they were angry was way less stressful.

“Thank you, but I’d rather do neither,” Jack replied. “The stress of either is bad for my heart.”

Tim shrugged. To each their own. “So, what’s the plan? Are you and Mom going to stay in Brazil until the investigation ends?”

The people Jack were bribing were effective, so it probably wouldn’t be long before Janet was officially (and illegally) acquitted. Tim could admit having a justice system so easily overturned was bad, but he was grateful in this circumstance.

“God no,” Jack said. “We’re lucky the police force is almost as corrupt as Gotham’s, or they’d never let us leave. No, we’ll lie low for a while, preferably in a place with little to no paparazzi.”

“I suggested the Mongolian steppes, but was outvoted,” Janet said mulishly.

“It’s too cold this time of year,” Jack reminded her. “Besides, the last time we were there a drone almost caught you on film.”

Janet muttered something about “tasty metal birds,” and Jack had to remind her that just because she *could* digest them didn’t mean she should.

“We’re sticking to the Americas,” Jack said firmly. “Close enough to fly back to Gotham if we need to, but with enough elbow room to escape the press. I’m thinking the Caribbean. There are plenty of islands we can vacation at that’ll be out of the way.”

“Fine,” Janet said, plonking her head against the back of her hotel room chair. “Be boring. I have no idea when you lost your sense of adventure, but it’s most irritating.”

“You’re adventure enough for me,” Jack said, finally cracking a smile. It was strained and exhausted, but still a smile. “As long as I’ve got you, I’m content to be a regular old stick in the mud.”

Tim was reminded suddenly how Jack had spent an obscene amount of time and money saving Janet from human legal systems, without even an explanation to why she’d snapped and killed that guy. He looked so tired. The gray in his hair stood out more than usual.

“I suppose you are still wonderful, even as a bore,” Janet said, leaning her shoulder against his.

Jack’s smile got softer. *Ew.* Reflective moment over.

“You’re so gross,” Tim gagged. These were the wrong emotions. Could they go back to anger and marital discord? That was much more palatable.

“You’ll understand someday,” Jack said fondly. “Even if you don’t want to get married, there will be people you adore. Being a little gross is a consequence of caring.”

Tim pictured the Waynes, then shoved the thought aside. “Gross is gross.”

He refused to have gushy feelings, romantic *or* platonic. He would get through this mortal life with his dignity intact or die trying.

“Whatever you say, kiddo,” Jack said, putting an arm around Janet, who tolerated the movement with a sniff. “We’ll get things sorted out down here. It’ll be a rough patch, but I think I’ve got enough politicians bribed that we’ll be okay. Just focus on being happy—oh, and keep us updated on school. Dick said there’s a photography club starting at Gotham Academy. I think you should sit in one of these days, just to see what it’s like.”

“Uh, sure,” Tim said, grateful that the murder had meant everyone was too distracted to focus on his current suspension/possible expulsion. His eyes drifted to Janet, who was picking her nails. “Actually, do you mind if I fly down to see you guys during the winter break? It’d be nice to catch up in person.”

He also wanted to know what Janet was hiding. His curious nature demanded answers.

Jack’s face softened. “I’d love that, Timmy. I’ve always regretted not being able to bring you along on our digs. It’s such an important part of our lives. Just let me know when you’re thinking of stopping by. We’ll make plans for a family weekend. How does Haiti sound?”

Tim cocked his head, then nodded. It was an island, which meant there would be plenty of tasty fish. He might even get to eat a sea turtle.

Janet glanced up. “No camping.”

“No camping,” Jack said, giving her a fond smile.

“There better not be,” Tim said, resting his chin in his hands, elbows on the table. “Tents make me homicidal. It’d suck if there was a second murder trial.”

Jack gave him a look. Okay, too soon. But it wasn’t *really* a joke.

They chatted for a few more minutes, mostly about the different islands Jack and Janet wanted to visit and which animals were off-limits to eat (much to Tim and Janet’s displeasure). The tension simmered down, and Jack seemed much less stressed than before. Promising him family time had been the right move.

Before the call ended, Tim glanced at his mother. Janet’s poker face was still in place. She was impossible to read, and when she put her mind to it she could out-stubborn Jack.

As risky as meeting in person was, Tim wasn’t going to put it off. Janet didn’t do lies, and omissions of information fell under that umbrella. Whatever had spooked her enough to resort to

homicide was a threat, and Tim wasn't going to stop until he knew exactly what it was.

"I'll see you in a few weeks then," Tim said at the end of the call. "It'll be good to see you again."

This Christmas, Tim would ask for answers, and he wouldn't rest until he showed his mom that out of the two of them he was *much* more stubborn than she.

Chapter End Notes

Janet: I hate lying. It's tedious.
Jack: So you'll finally tell me why you murdered that man?
Janet: No.
Jack: Jan, please. You could go to jail.
Janet: I welcome the challenge.
Jack: JAN.

Meanwhile, Cass:

Cass *trying to repair her phone*: Glue not working. Tape not working . . . hmm. Phone store? *looks around the barren wilderness she ended up in after stowing away in a vehicle to follow her lead* NO PHONE STORE!? 😱

How will she send her baby dragon brother his daily dose of memes now???

The Time You'll Turn Back To

Chapter Summary

Tim prepares to spend the holidays with his parents and deals with the fallout of the incident at school.

Chapter Notes

So it turns out you're less stressed when you take less credits. Huzzah for that (I'm so mad it works). We'll see how things go from here, I guess. Thanks for all your awesome comments last chapter, they really helped. This last week has been much better. 💖💖💖

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tim told Bruce that he was going to visit his parents for Christmas, the man looked torn between excitement and dismay. No doubt this was because the silly human knew that without Tim's amazing fighting abilities Gotham would be sitting ducks for other dragons, so Tim vowed to come home as soon as possible to defend the nest.

"Nobody will steal you on my watch," Tim said sternly, climbing onto the desk to pat Bruce's head in a gesture of comfort. "I've figured out the logistics perfectly. I'll use the zeta in Santo Domingo to get to them, then come back here every two days to keep my claim fresh. It's foolproof! No enemy dragons will take me unawares."

"Thank you, Tim," Bruce said, amused. "That's exactly what I was worried about."

Tim rolled his eyes. Good hoard members knew better than to be so sarcastic. He's worked *hard* on these logistics. Sure, he could technically leave longer before his claim would fade, but Tim wanted to be thorough. Plus, his humans were social creatures. They needed regular exposure to Tim for enrichment purposes. As a responsible dragon, it was his duty to give that to them.

Of course, in typical human fashion, nobody really understood the perils Tim was undertaking by leaving them undefended, even for only a few days. Dick was more concerned with Tim fighting his mom without the Waynes nearby to play interference. Tim had to remind him that he'd survived years in the same house as her (and was strong enough to totally beat her in a fight) so worry was

pointless. Alfred just requested Tim pick him up some rare, random spices from the local markets while he was there, and Jason requested books from local authors to add to his collection.

"I'm not a courier," Tim pouted while dinner was being prepped. "I already got you Christmas presents."

Tim had made sure to buy his humans things that were both safe to digest and had a long shelf life. They were by the fireplace in the living room, and should still be fresh by the time the holiday rolled around. They would be important rations in case the manor was ever under siege.

"So you're *not* going to get us souvenirs for enrichment purposes?" Jason said, flipping to a new page in the novel he was reading at the table.

Tim scowled. "I never said that."

Dangnabit, now he *had* to cater to their needs. Well played, Jason.

He texted Cass later to see if she wanted any souvenirs, but got no answer. She hadn't been texting since she left, but Tim had been pretty freaked out of Janet's arrest. Now that she was in the clear (thank the universe for bribes) Tim was starting to get worried about his ninja human again. Even sending memes wasn't getting him replies; *memes.* Those were Cass' favorite ways to communicate! Something was wrong, so that night he called Babs to panic.

"It's okay, Tim," Babs said in a soothing voice. "I think she broke her phone. Give her a few days, I'm sure she'll find a new one."

"Can't you double check CCTV footage to make sure she's okay?" Tim said anxiously. "She could be hurt, or dead, or terminally ill, or trapped in an alternate dimension—oh God, if that happened I'd have to find a magician to get her out, and I *hate* magicians—"

"Tim, she'll be fine, I promise," Babs said, "but I really can't do much. It's Cass; she's not *on* any CCTV footage."

Tim made a sad dragon noise, conceding the point. His panic continued to rise.

“Don’t worry kiddo, I’ll do my best to track her down,” Babs said. “Just be patient. She can’t hide from me forever.”

“Kay,” Tim said, dismayed, knowing that Cass very well *could.*

After texting his long-distance hoard in heartbreak, the Core Four agreed to keep an eye out for the elusive, limited-edition Black Bat premium human. Bart promised to do a few laps around the world looking for her, Cassie said she’d ask around the super community for info, and Kon said he’d attempt to locate her heartbeat.

“Attempt?” Tim said, aghast. “You dated her, but you didn’t even memorize her vitals? I thought you *cared.”*

How could *anyone* claim to have squishy feelings for someone if they didn’t even do that. It was like, the bare minimum. Tim had all the Waynes’ medical information, daily habits, and quirks memorized.

“Dude, cut me some slack. Your sister literally changed her heartbeat every hour just to mess with me,” Kon said. His voice sounded weird in the phone. “She has freakishly amazing control over her body. I don’t think *Superman* knows how to track her down.”

Tim grumbled a complaint about Kryptonians as a species before reluctantly letting Kon off the hook (if only because admitting he was powerless in the face of Cass was an amazing compliment that Tim preen. His hoard was special and deserved all the praise).

Without a lead on Cass, Tim could only continue to stress about his parents as the holidays drew closer. He kept his eyes on the news as the date to the family reunion neared. JMostly, that meant making theories about what went down in Brazil. So far, that wasn’t going well; Janet *still* refused to talk, although she’d agreed to spill the beans when Tim saw her in person. They’d just have to lock Jack in a closet for a while so he didn’t eavesdrop.

Luckily for everyone, Janet’s charges had finally been cleared. Tim could breath easy knowin his mom wasn’t going to jail. The current murder suspect was the mysterious figure that had been seen

exciting the building ten minutes before the body was “discovered.” Tim didn’t know who they were, but he was grateful they were being framed for Janet’s kill. Anything to keep his mom out of a prison cell. She’d die of boredom in such a small space.

Of course, another reason he was focusing so much on Jack and Janet was because it was a good distraction from school. He’d been suspended for the rest of the semester, but even after school ended for the year he had to go to the shrink. So far, refusing to talk during his anger management sessions wasn’t going well, and Micheal’s parents were trying to get Tim charged with aggravated assault. Not a fun time.

Fortunately, Jack had been preparing for something like this to happen for a long time, so he had an entire team of lawyers on call. With luck, the legal battle would go on so long that Tim would be graduated by the time it ended. Still, it had *not* been a fun phone call with Jack when Tim had to explain *why* said bevy of lawyers had to be used. Jack’s disappointment had hurt more than getting impaled.

The Waynes were disappointed too. Not so much about the incident itself (they’d all been proud of Tim for defending Cass’ honor. Alfred had made lemon tarts to celebrate, and even added pop rocks to Tim’s) but because Tim wasn’t cooperating with the school appointed therapist.

“The principal told me you just curl up and cover your ears the entire time,” Dick said soothingly as he sat next to Tim. “Giving the sessions a shot might not be a bad idea. I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think it’ll be.”

Tim glared at him, peeking out from the fetal position he’d curled up in when his human broached the subject. The library was supposed to be a safe space, yet it was being invaded. “He’s trying to make me *talk* about my *feelings.* I don’t even do that with *you* guys.”

Dick winced. “Fair point. But you know if you don’t cooperate, there’ll just be other consequences, right? This will help get the charges against you dropped faster.”

Tim pouted. He didn’t care about the charges. He cared about his freedom and the right to have private thoughts. Not this communication nonsense!

Unfortunately, Dick had a point. The thought of the sessions going on and on and on *forever* was physically painful. Tim had better things to do than suffer like this. Perhaps it was time to take the

higher road and do something unpleasant for a little while so he wouldn't have to deal with something worse down the road.

"Fine," Tim mumbled. "I'll try."

"Thanks, Timmy." Dick said. He looked ready to cry with relief. Weirdo.

The next anger management session, Tim did his best to grind out a sentence or two. He said something generic to the therapist and recited a phrase from WikiHow about emotional something or other. Mistake. Major mistake. The counselor seemed to think it was a breakthrough and wouldn't. Shut. Up. About Tim's progress. Every other session was a hell of ranking emotions, learning healthy processing, and working on rephrasing things to sound less homicidal. It didn't matter whether or not Tim participated, his stupid therapist would not be stopped.

Tim envied his mother. Possible incarceration sounded like paradise compared to this.

"Prisons have therapists too," Jason reminded him after Tim had spent an hour venting about his woes. They were in the kitchen while Jason taught Steph to make egg custard tarts. "They make you do sessions there even if you're a serial killer."

"Especially if you're a serial killer," Steph said as she licked custard off the whisk. "They like poking those brains."

Tim hissed, this time in alarm. Janet really *had* dodged a bullet.

***

The day before he was supposed to fly to Haiti, after a particularly bad session where the therapist tried to make him "open up" again, Tim came home spitting literal fire and refused to turn human for the entire afternoon. When he was born he hadn't signed up for any of this. He wished he could eat the therapist—or better yet, wasn't part human at all. Dragons never had to worry about awful things like this.

Bruce ended up taking him to the Watchtower for a meeting and let Tim curl possessively around him while growling at the rest of the league. It was cathartic, even though Tim was annoyed that only half the league seemed intimidated. The immortal, super-strength, and speedy ones just seemed amused. Well, screw them too.

When they got home that later night, Tim logged into the Batcomputer to hack the JLA social media accounts and make them do fake call-out posts for celebrities he didn't like, but Bruce caught him in the act and made him stop.

"If you're annoyed, work it out on the bags," Bruce said, "not my colleagues."

Tim grumbled unflattering things about said 'colleagues' under his breath. It'd be better if Bruce didn't have *any* friends, that way they couldn't take Tim's favorite human away from him. Dragons didn't like sharing.

"I know you don't like the sessions," Bruce said, "but I'm proud you're sticking through them. Just be patient a little longer, and you won't have to deal with it anymore. I'm working on a settlement to get your charges dropped."

"Wouldn't have to settle if I just ate Micheal's entire family," Tim muttered.

"What was that?" Bruce asked.

"Nothing," Tim said with a scowl. "I can't wait to see Mom again. *She* understands me."

Janet would always cheer him on, even though people sometimes didn't like the things she supported him to do. Like murder. That was kind of a touchy subject among the humans right now. As far as Tim was concerned, the only problem with Janet munching on that guy was that she got caught doing it. He was *pretty* sure Jack felt the same, although he was more dramatic about it. Luckily, Janet hadn't transformed when she bit the waiter's throat out, so the family secret was still safe. What an inspiration.

"Punch bags, not people," Bruce told Tim again, then sighed and walked toward the showers, shaking his head as if *he* were the one that was exhausted by all this drama.

“Hypocrite,” Tim muttered, watching him go mulishly. Bruce had an entire angst era after Jason died and nobody told *him* to stop punching thugs for stress relief; none of Tim’s humans appreciated the stress he was under right now.

Tim made to go toward the stairs so he could get ready for his trip, but stopped as his phone rang. The civilian one. Tim fumbled for the phone, absently noting his dad's caller ID.

Bruce paused near the showers and glanced back at Tim, looking curious. Tim waved at him to go so he could focus on his phone call.

"Hello? Dad?" Tim said, leaning against the Batcomputer. "I didn't think you'd have cell service so soon. Did you make it to Haiti already?"

He thought Jack and Janet were taking a night flight. They should’ve still been on the airplane, and normally they didn’t call him until after landing.

"*Tim."*

He froze.

That wasn’t Jack.

In all of Tim's life, Janet had never called. Never, not in fifteen years, no matter how desperate she was. But now she was using her husbands phone and she sounded, she sounded—

"Timothy!"

Her voice was raspy and panicked, not cool and clipped. The static sounded like thunder in Tim’s ears. She was *crying.*

“Mom!” Tim yelled.

Bruce started heading over, but Tim was already running toward the zeta tube, phone pressed against his ear. He needed more information, but the only sound was his mother’s sobs.

“Mom, Mom talk to me, what’s wrong?” Tim said, inputing the coordinates closest to Haiti.

Janet didn’t answer. There was a clatter like the phone had been dropped, then there were snarls. Snarls and screams.

The Batcave disappeared in a flash of light. Tim stumbled out of the tube’s exit in Santo Domingo, looking wide-eyed at the empty streets on the edge of the city, dark and dusty as the sun had long ago set. It took precious seconds to open the tracking app on his phone—the one he and Janet insisted on Jack using so they could keep tabs of him wherever he went—and sprint in that direction.

“Tim, come back!” Bruce called behind him, having followed through the zeta.

There was no time to listen. Tim barely even heard him. His heart pounded in his ears, and he didn’t even look at his surroundings for possible witnesses before he transformed and took to the skies.

He flew faster than he ever had, but Tim had a feeling he was already too late.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, dragons aren't immune to poison. ;)

Official end of part 4. Will Tim make it in time?

For those who're curious, this is the last song of Jack and Janet's playlist and the inspiration for this chapter's title. Enjoy 💖 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc135vzvM9s

Meanwhile:
Cass: Phone?
Isolationist monk: For the tenth time, no. Our monastery doesn't even have electricity.
Cass: Son of a biscuit.

Drastic Measures

Chapter Summary

Haiti is known for its warmth, but all Tim feels is cold.

Chapter Notes

Thanks all y'all for being patient. I meant to post this sooner, but time ran away from me. Here's your official welcome to part 5, which I've affectionately dubbed "Tim's year from hell."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

White lights and sirens. Parked ambulances and idle gurneys. Automatic doors, milling people, noise, noise noise. Tim barely noticed; it washed over him like rain. Was it rain or tears? He was soaked, but it wasn't with water. Too much iron.

The doors opened. He stumbled inside. Fluorescent light almost blinded him—which set of eyes was he using? He needed human ones. Less sensitive.

Where did he go now? He—he didn't know. Standing was hard. So hard. Too much weight on his shoulders. Too much fear in his heart.

A nurse looked over. Paled. Started running toward him.

"P—Please," Tim said as his legs shook, unable to hold the weight of two people in this small, stupidly delicate form. "Help."

Everything hurt and the world was too bright, even though the sun hadn't risen. Everything hurt and his parents weren't moving. Tim wanted to scream.

Everything started to spin. Tim crumpled and fell. As he hit the ground he remembered why he was wet; it was blood. On his hair, his clothes, eyes, and every other part of him.

It smelled like home. Like Mom. It made him sick.

***

The hospital room was sterile. Despite the humidity outside, it felt cold.

Tim was numb. He felt like part of him was screaming at such a high register even his sharp ears couldn't pick it up. People kept trying to talk to him, asking what happened and where else he was hurt, and they needed to shut up.

Tim wanted to tell the doctors it was okay, he wasn't *that hurt.* Except he was having trouble talking right now. The words got stuck in his throat and rerouted to his brain. All he could do was sit there, trying to make noise while nurses and doctors fussed over him.

Someone said surgery, told him to move. Tim didn't, so they tried to lift him by the arms. He finally found his noise, and screamed and kicked until they stopped and treated him on the hallway floor. He didn't remember how long that took, but at some point they got bandages on his cuts and scrapes, then took him to Jack's room to sit by his dad. The deep gouges in his side, which he didn't remember getting, were stitched up as well. Tim stared at the white fabric poking out from under his hospital shirt, and absently thought about the scars he'd have to get removed. Jack was always so particular about that.

Jack.

Tim shivered as his heart throbbed. He wanted to throw up. Stupid. He was overreacting. Jack wasn't even dead. Tim was sitting *right next to him,* and the doctors said it hadn't been a fatal dose. Tim needed to pull himself together. He had to be strong because Janet was losing it and Jack *wasn't waking up* and someone had to keep it together.

Except, he had no idea what he was supposed to do. Obeah Man was dead. Janet got him good. There weren't even pieces of him left, and the entire ritual site was ash. Tim didn't know where else to go for revenge. He could sew wounds together but he wasn't a neurosurgeon, he couldn't fix his

dad's brain. And he couldn't be with his mom, no matter how badly she was hurting, because she might try to kill him again.

The wound in his side ached at the reminder.

To come close to a grieving dragon will only end in blood. That's what she'd told him long ago, and it was true. If he tried to reach out he'd get bit, and Tim wouldn't get lucky a second time.

Janet was currently sedated. For safety, the nurses explained. They didn't want her attacking anybody else. Apparently, the nurse who'd been there when she regained consciousness was also in ER now. Luckily, Janet had been delirious and hadn't used her venom. She hadn't even used her dragon teeth, but she'd still caused serious harm.

Tim rubbed a thick bandage on his forearm. He'd been lucky too. Janet had almost ripped his head off when he'd found her and Jack. She didn't even know it *was* Tim. Just panicked and fought, just like she was supposed to when her mate was hurt, even though the poison had corroded her mind and left her raving mad. That was fine. Her aggression was a *good* thing, but Tim he didn't tell the doctors that. Jack didn't like them telling people they were dragons.

Tim hiccuped again, clutching his chest to make the noises stop. They didn't. He kept shaking like some kind of pathetic human. He was fine. He *had* to be fine. Except, how could he be, after what he had to do to get his parents here? Not all of Janet had made it to the hospital. She wouldn't *stop.* He'd had to hurt her bad—so bad she'd never be the same—and now he couldn't even comfort her.

He'd wanted to save her, but her worst injuries weren't from Obeah man. They were from *him.*

Tim gave up his pretense of control and hugged his knees. The tears came in hot and salty. Beside him, Jack's heart rate monitor beeped sedately. That and his breathing were the only proof he was still alive. That Tim hadn't completely failed his hoard.

He'd give anything for his dad to wake up; an arm, a leg, another godforsaken camping trip. He and Janet needed Jack. Needed to see him happy and gregarious and utterly enamored with them. Needed him to smile as he planned ridiculous outings and fussed over their family secret. Needed to know he was okay, because he was all that kept their family together. If he was gone it would all fall apart. *They* would fall apart. Janet and Tim wouldn't survive without him.

“Dad, please, come back,” Tim whispered.

Jack Drake stayed asleep, hooked up a thousand machines, and didn’t make a sound.

***

Eventually, Bruce arrived. Tim didn't know if it had been days or hours since he’d last seen the man. The only thing he registered was that Bruce was suddenly hugging him. For once, Tim didn't hesitate to return the gesture.

"I'm so sorry chum, it took me a while to find you," Bruce whispered, "but it's going to be okay. I promise."

Tim shook his head, burying his face deeper into Bruce's shoulder. He’d—how did Bruce get here? He was supposed to be in Gotham. Except . . . That’s right. Bruce had followed him through the zeta, but Tim had left him behind. He must have come here from Santo Domingo. How long did that take? Tim didn’t know. Everything was fuzzy. It hurt to think.

"You did a good job,” Bruce said, rubbing circles on Tim’s back. “You got here as soon as you could. The nurses tell me you're the reason they're both still alive."

Lies. Tim had only got them to the hospital. Jack had been dying and Janet was—Janet had been—

"I had to fight her," he whispered. "She wouldn't stop. I didn't mean to hurt her—"

"Shh, I know,” Bruce said. “You did what you had to, she'll understand."

Tim shook his head, biting back a sob. Bruce didn’t understand. She'd been near rabid with rage, injured from the plane crash and the poison. Tim hadn’t seen a spark of her usual intelligence. It was only instinct guiding her. Like fighting an animal. He shuddered, pressing closer to Bruce. That hadn’t been his mom.

"The doctors are doing everything they can. They're going to be okay," Bruce continued, soft and fierce. "You saved them, Tim."

Tim burst into tears again. He couldn't stop; Bruce was *wrong.* He'd hadn't been able to make her stop. He'd had to hurt her. Permanently hurt, because Tim hadn't been strong enough to beat her any other way. He could still taste the blood.

"I didn't save anyone," Tim whispered.

The man hushed him again, rocking slightly as he weathered Tim's grief. He felt like the only solid thing in the world.

***

Bruce handled everything. Tim wasn't in any condition to be useful.

The official story was close to the truth; Tim had been visiting his parents for the weekend, but due to miscommunication Bruce didn't get the memo. As Tim's dual guardian, that had made him panic and fly out to the Drakes immediately, only to find that all three of them had gone down in a plane crash and been taken hostage by Obeah Man, some two-bit cult leader who wanted to double-up on a ransom call and sacrificial ritual.

In the story, Tim had been able to steal a Jeep and escape the cult with his parents before they fell unconscious, then get them to the hospital. It sounded so much more heroic than the draconic pit fight that had actually happened, which had left Tim with deep gouges down his entire left side and Janet with two missing fingers.

Bruce said the injuries were from dog fighting and torture, or something equally bloody and cruel and *wrong*. Tim didn't listen too closely; he could still taste Janet's blood in his mouth, and the memory made him retch. He'd never thought he'd feel guilty about hurting his mother. He must be losing his mind.

Tim clung to Bruce every waking moment. He couldn't bear to let go. Whenever Bruce needed to talk to someone in private Tim started to breathe funny. The only solution they could find was

leaving him in Jack’s room, wrapped in Bruce's coat while Tim listened to his father’s heart monitor.

There were talks of counseling and therapy. The nurses kept trying to make him eat. Tim ignored them. He just held his dad's hand and wished he'd wake up.

Somewhere in the haze of awfulness Jason appeared too. He said he'd come as soon as Bruce got word out what had happened, and that Dick was back in Gotham preparing a spare room.

The words didn't compute. A spare room for what? Tim just stared at his zombie in silence, then hugged him. Jason was real. He was back. If Jason was okay maybe Jack would be too.

***

When it was time to leave Haiti, Bruce sat Tim down in a plastic chair and looked him in the eyes.

"Tim, sweetheart, I need you to pay attention right now. Can you do that?" he said.

Tim blinked fuzziness out of his eyes and nodded.

"Your dad will be okay," Bruce said slowly, enunciating each word. “The poison acted as a paralytic and may have given him nerve damage, but he should make a partial recovery. They expect him to wake up eventually, and then his healing can begin."

Tim managed to nod, but his chin kept wobbling. He didn't know if it was from relief or sadness. Jack wasn't supposed to get hurt. It wasn’t allowed. That was Tim and Janet’s one rule.

"We have a room at the manor for him,” Bruce continued. “He can stay there while he heals. I know you'd rather be close to him.”

Yes, Tim did. He needed to make sure his dad was breathing properly. But something was bothering him. His brain couldn’t figure out what, but something about what Bruce said . . .

Tim's furrowed his brow. "What about Mom?"

Bruce hesitated before taking both Tim's hands. "Your mom…isn't well. I don't think you should be near her just yet."

"But Mom needs Dad," Tim said. "He's *hers."*

Her mate, her treasure, her only living hoard member. They completed each other like the sun and moon. Jack was hers utterly and completely. More than he'd ever be Tim's. She needed him.

"I know, but you can't be around her," Bruce said, "I'm not even sure if she'll stay in human form much longer. The sedatives are the only thing keeping her in one shape. I'm calling in Hal and J'onn to help get her somewhere safe to recover until she's lucid. Until then, I think it's best we separate the two of you."

Tim shook his head. "No, you don't get it. She can't leave Jack."

Not like this. Tim wouldn't allow it. Janet was not going to wake up alone and scared. He wouldn't let that happen. He—he had to make sure she was okay, because he'd rescued her *and* Dad, not just one of them. He had to look after his hoard, that was how it worked. He—

Hoard?

Tim's hands started to shake. Oh.

"I promise, we're not abandoning her," Bruce said. "But she's too dangerous to be in a normal hospital, and I can't trust her around you at the manor. Please work with me, Tim. It'll just be for a little while."

"No!" Tim yelled. He ripped his hands out of Bruce's. "You're not allowed to do that!"

There was a hole in his heart from when Jason had died. An old, empty wound that had twisted and knifed and scoured him to ribbons. The pain still haunted him some days; a quite, panicked fear that he'd only imagined Jason back, that he wasn't real, and that if he wasn't nearby it meant he didn't exist. It was the most horrific feeling Tim had ever known. He was *not* submitting Janet to it.

"If you take Dad away from Mom, you'll kill her," he told Bruce, "and I'll never, *ever* forgive you."

Never, not even his favorite human. Not even Bruce.

"Chum, she almost ripped you in half," Bruce said, carefully putting a hand on the back of Tim's head. "I'm just trying to help."

Tim shook his head. "Not like this. Not like this."

She was Jack's mate, but Janet belonged to Tim too. She was *his,* and nobody was allowed to harm her, even with good intentions. It didn't matter that Tim wasn't supposed to hoard her—that it wasn't proper dragon behavior—*she was his mom,* and that was all that mattered. He'd let her maul him as often as she wanted, if only it meant she'd be okay.

"Then what can we do?" Bruce asked. "How can I help you?"

Tim hunched his shoulders. His throat was sore and his sinuses were raw. His bandages lay heavy, like a shroud. He'd had to pin her near the end, but she had raked him with her claws. If he'd hadn't done something drastic, she would've disemboweled him. So he'd gone drastic but went *too* far, and now his mom was missing two fingers and Jack still wasn't waking up.

"I don't know, B," Tim said brokenly, "I don't *know."*

Except he did. He needed to tuck his head under Janet's chin and listen to her pulse, fight over how to organize gemstones, and glare at her as they each latched onto Jack and refused to let go. He needed her to be okay, because she was one of his favorite people and he'd taken that for granted. But Bruce couldn't wave his hand and make her better. Nobody could. Tim had *failed.*

He hiccuped, and was pulled into another hug.

"Then we'll figure it out together," Bruce said, enveloping Tim in his arms as if he could shield him from the world itself. “One step at a time.”

Tim nodded, too tired to think anymore. Everything was too big to face. He went slack, trusting Bruce to keep him steady, but still shook. Emotions crackled through him like electricity. It hurt to feel, to think, to exist.

“I—I was trying to *save* her, B,” he whispered, curling small, human fingers into his human’s shirt.

There had been so much fire, so much blood. He’d just wanted to get her and Dad to safety. But—but after he’d pinned her down, she still hadn’t stopped. He’d had to keep fighting, and then he’d—he’d—he’d lost control.

“I didn’t mean it,” he said. “I *didn’t.”*

His instincts had been too much, and the warning bite was too strong and too fast for her to dodge. Janet could’ve died.

“I know, I know chum,” Bruce whispered. He wove his fingers into Tim’s hair. “You did your best.”

Tim shook his head. His best wasn’t worth anything.

“She’s going to be okay, Tim,” Bruce whispered. “Both of them are, I promise.”

Tim hugged him tighter, trying to block out the world. Pressed against his chest, Tim could hear Bruce’s heartbeat, quiet but *there.* Strong. Warm. Living. His.

He needed to believe Bruce. He *had* to. B would never lie to him.

But it was hard to have unbreakable faith when the whole world was broken.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, Janet was supposed to die, but I couldn't bring myself to do that to my precious babygirl, so she lives to maul another day! 🥳

The irony is that I started writing this arc before my own father's collapse and temporary paralysis. I also can't blame my current anxiety crisis for the angst, since I wrote it during a completely different breakdown over a year ago, lol. However, this chapter and the next few have been edited several times, so it's *refined* angst. Take that as you may. 😅

Meanwhile . . .
Cass: No phone, no memes, no hot showers. Hate this.
Monk: D-Do you want to learn a new special fighting move?
Cass: *sigh* Yes. What is?
Monk: This really cool instant-kill technique this woman taught me last month. What was her name again? Susan? Sandra? Ah yes, Shiva.
Cass:
Cass: SHE WAS HERE?!

Coma Little Bit Closer

Chapter Summary

Tim's emotions get the best of him. Luckily, he has an army of humans to help him through it.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, long time no see. I'm sorry it took so long to post this one, I thought it was mostly ready but I decided I wanted to overhaul it, then got hit by major burnout. 😅

An alternate title for this chapter could be "Tim gets all the cuddles," so hopefully there's a bit of comfort to season the angst. 😉

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If the Waynes were hoping Tim would cheer up when they got back to Gotham, they were sorely mistaken. It didn't matter that Tim was back with his hoard, or that they were extra doting and super attentive. Tim was a slug. Movement was impossible and happiness was a lie. He was boycotting all forms of sentience until the world became a better place. Given that he lived in Gotham, that probably wouldn't happen.

He'd been back in the city for several days, and had refused to do anything except curl up in his bed and emote. His hoard kept trying to lure him out, but Tim didn't care. Slug mode was not for the faint of heart.

Maybe he could've been convinced to get up if he could see his parents, but that wasn't an option. Jack and Janet were in Bludhaven. It had taken a lot of screaming and crying before Bruce agreed to transfer them to a small clinic between the border of the city and Gotham, rather than a more remote JLA facility. Tim was glad they were close, but Bludhaven was *still* too far away; Tim had wanted them to go to Gotham General, but everyone was worried Janet or Tim would go feral and attack each other again. It was a valid concern.

When Janet had woken up the first time, she'd attacked anyone who got too close. Bruce had to call in Green Lantern to restrain her with his constructs. Martian Manhunter had come as well to use his empathy skills to calm her down. Tim had hoped that would be the end of it, but as J'onn had delicately put it, Janet had had a complete psychotic break and was too dangerous to be around anything living. The facility the Drakes were in now was manned by JLA-vetted medical personnel, and Green Lantern was on permanent standby to make sure she didn't attack anyone else. Tim wasn't allowed to see her.

He understood. He *did.* Tim and Janet could barely coexist on a good day. With how frayed both of them were, it was almost guaranteed that they'd kill each other on sight. Tim didn't have the brain space for self control right now, and Janet had almost lost her *mate*. It'd be even worse for her.

It'd be safer if they were further away, but Tim couldn't send her and Jack somewhere else. At least this way he could still reach them if something happened. He could still delude himself into thinking he could help.

Not that Tim would be able to do that. His 'help' did more harm than good back in Haiti. It was safer to be a slug, stuck in bed moping for eternity. Slugs didn't hurt anyone.

Vaguely, Tim knew Bruce was really worried. He'd never seen Tim like this before, and it was making him panic. Tim wanted to tell him about when Jason had died because that had also been pretty bad, but this . . . This felt worse. At least Jason hadn't been grievously injured by Tim trying to *save* him.

Every time he closed his eyes, Tim remembered fighting Janet; the slash of claws, the burn of acid, the crunch of bones. He dreamed about the flight to the hospital, of not knowing if he was too late, and feeling his dad's heartbeat grow weaker with each beat of his wings.

Tim didn't get much sleep these days.

Food was also hard. Alfred said he had to eat, but Tim's stomach didn't want to hold anything down. Nothing sounded good, even his Tim Specials. So he just . . . didn't eat.

He didn't do anything, really. Didn't go to his anger management sessions, didn't get out of bed, didn't go on patrol. The one time he went out as Robin after returning from Haiti, he'd almost ripped a man in half, so Bruce wanted him to take a break.

Tim didn't want a break. He wanted *to* break. His head was full of feelings he didn't understand, and the only outlet for them was violence. Except, when he got his claws out, all Tim could think about was how he'd almost killed Janet, which made him want to throw up.

He didn't understand himself. His stupid brain kept thinking she was hoard, which was so contradictory and wrong that he felt ill. Everything was backwards. All he knew was that he was hurting and really, *really* missed his parents.

Jack still hadn't woken up, and Janet was . . . Not doing well. Green Lantern was assigned to watch over her in shifts with J'onn. Jason said it was because Bruce hated Hal. Bruce said it was because Hal had powers "uniquely suited" to containing dragons. Tim couldn't care less for the reason, he just wanted news on his mom, so he'd been spamming Hal's phone for updates.

So far, every reply had been a big, fat "no changes" and tons of typos. Janet was still raving mad and screeching loud enough to break glass. Leaving some of Jack's things near her didn't help. It just made her more aggressive, and hurt herself trying to find him.

That wasn't right. None of this was right.

"It'll be okay, bud," Dick said after Tim had another pathetic freak out. "They're being looked after by the best doctors out there. Bruce even has the JLA helping your mom. We're doing everything we can."

Tim buried his face in Dick's chest, unresisting as his bendy human tugged one of his arms up and placed it against his arm. Tim's fingers were flush with Dick's pulse point, which helped the dragon relax slightly. If he didn't have actual, physical proof that his hoard was alive, it got hard to breathe. Tim could hold his breath for a long time, but he still needed air. So, hoard cuddles.

It was pathetic how many assurances his humans had to give him, but sometimes words wouldn't cut it. He needed to feel their pulse beneath his fingers and hear their hearts beat strong and steady. His senses never betrayed him.

"B-But what if Dad doesn't wake up?" Tim said, now that his breath was back. "What if Mom doesn't get better? What if—"

What if it was Tim's fault?

Dick kissed his forehead. "They will. Your family is strong, Tim, just like you. It's just going to be a little while before you can see them, that's all."

Tim curled tighter around Dick. Everyone kept saying that, but Tim didn't want to wait. He wanted everything to be better *now.*

"Shh, Timmy it's okay, we've got you. It's alright," Dick said. He rubbed circles onto Tim's back. "Just let us help. We're here for you, I promise."

"Are you?" Tim whispered. Cass was still MIA, buried so deep in her Momquest that nobody could find her. Babs came by when she could, but she had to stay in the Clocktower to access her mainframe so she had to keep breaking Tim's heart by leaving, and Kon and Bart and Cassie were too far away for Tim to protect. It was paralyzing, thinking of all the ways they could get hurt. What kind of dragon scattered his hoard like this? He couldn't do anything properly.

Even though the Waynes were with him, he felt alone.

"We are," Dick said, pressing a kiss against Tim's temple. "And we're not going anywhere."

He sounded so confident, so sure. He couldn't be lying.

"'Kay." Tim wrapped himself tighter in his blankets, breathing in the familiar scent of laundry detergent. It was going to be okay. Dick promised. Jack would wake up, Janet would get better, and everything would be *fine.* It had to be.

Tim didn't think he could survive if it didn't.

***

A couple days later, Alfred hummed thoughtfully as he ran a hand through Tim's hair. Everyone loved doing that, but now it was almost constant. Humans were so clingy . . . But Tim didn't mind that right now.

"I think you are due for a trim, master Tim," the butler said. "It's starting to get unruly."

It took a few seconds for the words to register, but then Tim jerked away from the butler like he'd been tased.

Haircut? No. No no no.

"I want it long," he said, clutching his bangs so Alfred didn't get any ideas. "No trims."

"Are you sure? You've always preferred it near your ears," Alfred said.

Which, true. Tim had the same haircut most of his life. It was out of the way but still fluffy and fun, and easy to maintain. But . . . But . . .

Tim curled his fingers through his hair even tighter. It was soft, silky, and just long enough to brush against his cheekbones. It was shorter than Janet's, but it felt like hers.

"I'm sure," he whispered.

He couldn't be near her. Couldn't risk them killing each other in their grief. But if his hair could match hers, Tim could pretend she was right beside him.

"Alright then, master Timothy," Alfred said softly. "If that is what you wish."

***

Two weeks into Tim's malaise, school started up again. Tim was except from attending because of his home situation, and nobody knew when he'd be back. Frankly, Tim couldn't care less. Jack was still in a coma, and that took precedence.

Luckily, there was one spot of good news. Janet was moved out of 24-hour observation and was now stable enough for J'onn to declare her "no longer a danger to all living things." Tim called her immediately, fumbling with the buttons on his phone, which had its screen cracked almost beyond repair. It'd been wrecked after his flight to Haiti. The screen was shattered and the screen glitched, but he hadn't replaced it yet. That would require getting out of bed.

Tim pressed it to his ear, forgetting to breathe. It rang three times before Janet answered. It felt like an eternity.

"Mom?" Tim croaked.

"Hello, Timothy," she said. Her voice sounded raw.

Tim balled his fist into his mouth to stop from crying, but couldn't hide the hitch in his breath. She finally remembered him.

"*Mom,"* he said again. This was what he wanted, but he didn't know what else to say. The doctors were hopeful, but Jack still might not wake up. His dad could *die* and Tim wouldn't be able to do anything. He couldn't even hug his mom, who was hurting even worse than him.

Tim had thousands photos of the three of them together; millions of memories spent with his parents. Birthdays, movie nights, camping trips, territory disputes . . . He'd taken them all for granted. Hadn't realized that there was a time limit on them. That there were some dangers even a fire breathing dragon couldn't protect their hoard from. He'd wasted it all. He'd been a bad son.

There was an ache threatening to break him to pieces. A poisonous grief he couldn't cure. And Tim . . . Tim didn't know if he even wanted to try to get better. His heart was a chasm, and it was only a matter of time before he hit the ground.

"Mom, I'm not okay," he said. The phone creaked as he squeezed it.

Janet released a rattled, staticky breath. Tim heard the tears in her voice as she replied. “Neither am I, hatchling.”

Tim wished he could hold her hand and feel her fingernails press into his skin as the two of them tried to mimic human affection. He wanted to see her subtle, blink-and-it-was-gone smile and the proud curl of her lips when things went well. He wanted his family back. Not on a screen or in a neighboring city, but *here,* with him where they belonged.

“I love you,” he told her. *Please don’t leave me.*

“I love you as well,” she replied. *Never.*

There were no more words to say. Communication had never been their strong suit, but they were *trying,* because with Jack still unconscious they were the only family the other had left. He would want them to stick together. He’d tell them that’s what families did.

In the background, Tim heard the steady beep of his father’s heart monitor. Janet was in his hospital room. She’d run straight there as soon as the JLA had given permission, and Tim knew she wouldn’t leave unless hell froze over.

Even though she was on the mend, Tim still wasn’t allowed to be near her. He knew better than to try, not when one wrong move could cost him the rest of his family. But he could manage a phone call. He could still be with her like this, even if it was still too far away.

He curled up under his covers and stayed on the line, listening to his mother’s breaths and his father’s heart, and tried not to let the tears escape.

They weren’t supposed to be broken, but at least they could be broken together.

***

Tim called Janet every day for hours and hours. They didn't talk much. Frankly, Tim didn't know what to say. There wasn't a good way to tell someone he'd spent the majority of his life trying to murder that he suddenly really, really didn't want them dead, so he didn't.

Janet understood. She didn't like words either. Instead, she put the phone on speaker so she and Tim could listen to Jack breathe for hours every day.

***

Three weeks after the accident, Bruce brought up school with Tim.

"I've talked to the faculty. They're willing to make accommodations, and the I got the charges against you settled out of court," Bruce said. He smoothed Tim's bed head with a calloused hand. Tim leaned into the contact, buried in his blankets. "I know you don't want to go, but it might help take your mind off things."

Tim peaked out from under his blanket, too washed out to glare. Bruce had bags under his eyes and needed a haircut. Tim wanted to tell Bruce he shouldn't worry about him. Instead, he rolling closer to the man and wrapped himself around Bruce's arm.

B's pulse was strong. His skin felt hot. He was here. He was real. He cared.

"Okay, I'll go," Tim said. His voice was muffled because his face was pressed into the mattress.

He couldn't care less about his education, but Jack wanted him to graduate high school. It was one of his dad's dreams, so even though he'd failed to protect his hoard, he could still make them happy. Maybe.

The head pats returned. "Thank you, champ. I'm glad to hear it. If you change your mind, that's okay to. We'll take it one day at a time."

Tim shrugged and leaned into the cuddle more. He kept his hand on Bruce's pulse, and tried not to think of anything else.

***

A week after he was back in class, Steph burst into Tim's room.

"Happy ordinary day!" she said. "Your savior is here!"

Tim sat up and blinked in confusion. He'd finally fallen asleep after three hours lying awake in bed regretting being born. He wasn't sure if this was part of some new dream.

Steph shrugged off her puffy, purple coat and flung it onto the back of Tim's swivel chair. Snow particles dripped onto the carpet. She was still wearing snow boots.

"Alfred didn't make you take those off?" he croaked.

"I snuck in through the laundry room window," Steph said, kicking off her shoes. "He doesn't even know I'm here."

She plopped onto the bed with a heavy bounce. Tim flailed and almost fell off. Steph snorted in amusement.

"How are you holding up?" she asked. "I heard you're back at school, finally."

He shrugged. "I'm not okay, but I'm breathing."

"Good," Steph said. "You weren't doing that for a while. I'm sorry I couldn't come over sooner. I was visiting my grandparents in Pennsylvania when I got the news, then Mom got sick for a couple weeks and I was taking care of her. Tooth abscess. It really knocked her out. I was monitoring her all day every day, otherwise I would've been here faster than the Flash."

“I get it,” Tim said. And he did. Parents were important. He was glad Steph could help hers. “You’ve been texting me too.”

Tim wasn’t answering his messages often, but that didn’t stop Steph from bombing him with gifs and memes. Bart, Kon, and Cassie did it too, along with questions about how he was coping. The short answer was that he wasn’t. Tim was taking a break from the team and Robin. His emotions were still making him too violent around criminals. Bruce didn’t want him to accidentally-on-purpose kill somebody.

“Yeah, well, it’s the least I can do. I’m not the best at sympathy, but I can at least make you laugh,” Steph said. She fiddled with the hem of her sweater. “I don’t like stock phrases or ‘there theres.’ Those never helped me growing up, so . . .Memes.”

Tim leaned against her shoulder. “They helped. Thank you. I’m sorry for not hanging out more. I’m not giving you enough enrichment.”

Her arm wrapped around his shoulders. “My scaly friend and partner in crime, you literally don’t need to apologize. We’re gucci. Now check out this cat video. It got drenched in slime, and it looks just like you whenever you fall into Gotham Bay.”

That was what Tim liked about Steph. She held grudges about random, petty things, but when something went wrong she helped in whatever way she could. Usually that involved explosions, glitter, and quips, but sometimes that was what a person needed to feel better. Tim didn’t know how to handle his emotions, but Steph’s presence helped. She didn’t baby him or walk on eggshells, but he still knew she was looking out for him.

“I don’t look like that, I have way more class,” Tim said as they watched the cat hiss and try to lick off the slime.

“I have a blackmail folder that says otherwise,” Steph said.

They lay there for a long time. Steph flicked through her social media to show Tim memes and videos while Tim curled next to her, a hand on her pulse point. Dick peeked in after a while and smiled when he saw them. Tim was pretty sure he got a candid photo of both of them before he left.

“Bruce is still looking for Cass,” Steph said. “He had a lead at this weird monastery place, but that was weeks ago and the trail is cold again. As soon as he finds her, he’ll bring her back.”

“He doesn’t have to do that,” Tim said. “Don’t want to interrupt her Momquest.”

“You’re way more important than some deadbeat who never paid child support,” Steph snorted. “Cass will think so too, trust me.”

Tim hummed. Normally he’d say yes to that in a heartbeat, but his feelings about mothers were a liminal zone right now. He was too compromised to make an unbiased reply.

“People are getting worried about Robin,” Steph said a few minutes later. She had a compilation of the best Found Bat-Footage, which was all terrible and very blurry. Tim had done better when he was nine. “Nobody’s seen you on the streets in weeks. There’s a Reddit conspiracy board about what happened to you.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh,” Steph said. “Trafficking is the main one, or that you went rogue and Batman had to lock you in his dungeon. It’s hilarious; half the people think you’re an innocent butterfly and the rest and scared out of their pants by you. That *never* gets old.”

Tim snorted. It *was* funny. Crooks and gangsters knew not to mess with him, but the nature of the grapevine meant that newcomers and civilians didn’t believe a word of that. It made patrol fun because he could trick people with his Bambi eyes, then strike when their backs were turned and traumatize them for life. Dick said it was mean to do that, but he had no leg to stand on because he did the exact same thing, just with less teeth.

“Bruce doesn’t want me on the field yet,” Tim said after a moment. “He says I’m too dangerous.”

“Bruce can suck it. He’s old and out of touch,” Steph said. “I’m surprised you haven’t snuck out already.”

Tim shrugged. “Don’t feel like it.”

Going to school a couple days a week was all he could manage, and he spent the entire time with his face pressed into his desk. The teachers didn't even look scared of him anymore, just sympathetic. One even gave him a cookie and said he was there if Tim ever needed to talk. It was *humiliating.* If Tim couldn't even keep his school reputation from going up in flames, there was no way he had the emotional capacity to keep up his Robin persona.

"Mood," Steph said, hooking her ankle around his. "Still, I can't believe you're listening to an authority figure. It's crazy. At this rate, pigs will fly."

"If that happens, I call dibs on airborne barbecue," Tim said, tucking his face into the hollow of her shoulder.

"Okay," she said, "but you have to share some with me. That sounds awesome."

Steph opened Youtube and went to a prank miniseries. Tim only half paid attention to it, but found himself chuckling anyway. He blamed Steph's guffaws. They were infectious.

"I have a brilliant idea," Steph said conspiratorially. "Everyone is convinced you're dead or evil. We should take advantage of that."

Tim scrunched his eyebrows. "How?"

"Easy. I'll be Robin for a bit, just while you're on break," Steph said. "I'll say I'm your replacement after Batman fired you for war crimes."

"Bruce is stuck with me. He couldn't fire me even if he wanted to," Tim pointed out.

"But *Gotham* doesn't know that," Steph said. "Come on Tim, it'd be hilarious. You can man the comms for me, like my own Oracle! With your brains and my dashing good looks, we can play all sorts of pranks on the masses."

Tim could imagine all the trouble Steph would get into as Robin. Spoiler was a known terror at this point, but another Robin would be a new brand of chaos. It'd throw the entire rogues gallery for a loop.

"How much glitter would you be putting on my suit?" Tim asked.

"None," Steph said. "It's going to go on everyone *else.*"

She launched into an inspired speech about all the great things she could accomplish as Robin. Candid Bat videos, prank compilations, being the first female Robin, stopping crime, and making Tim laugh.

"I guarantee I can get you slap-happy every patrol," she said. "Nay, I vow to. You need more pep in your step, and I'm an expert in that."

"Because your name is Step-h?" Tim said, bemused.

"Yes, the H stands for happy."

Tim flung a pillow at her. "You're as bad as Dick. That was terrible."

"How dare you mock your lord and master, Ms. Puntastic," Steph said with a gasp. "You'll pay for your crimes."

She lunged forward and tickled him. By the time Dick came up to tell them dinner was ready, Tim was red faced and giggling. It was the best he'd felt in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Featured off-screen are Jason, Babs, and everyone else's smothering love. This chapter was already long, so I resisted including every hoard member, but rest assured they're giving Tim all the medicinal cuddles and affection he needs in these trying times.

Meanwhile:

Jack: Mm ow, what's . . . Jan?
Janet: Darling?
Jack: Hey sweetheart, what's with the IV—Jan, are you crying?
Janet: Of course I am, you ridiculous man. I I thought I'd lost you. You left me alone.
Jack: Oh sweetheart, I'm not going anywhere.
Janet: Promise?
Jack *squeezing her hand*: Forever and always, my precious darl….ing….
Jack:
Jack:
Jack: …Janet, where are the rest of your fingers?
Janet: Hm? Oh, Timothy bit them off, it hardly matters.
Jack:
Jack: EXCUSE ME?

There we go, alive and in (mostly) one piece, like I promised. ;)

On that note, here is a nicer, happy song from Jack and Janet's playlist as an apology for the one I linked last time: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAjYbmRvNb4

What I Wouldn't Give (To Hold You)

Chapter Summary

Jack is back!

Surprisingly, Tim is less okay about this than he thinks.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a devil to edit, and ended up being significantly longer than I planned. Enjoy my suffering, I guess. 😅

(I also accidentally posted it in the wrong fic. If you got that email, sorry, Crime Alley Counterfeit did not get an update. I'm just tired and dumb.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim burst into Bruce's room like a wrecking ball, half dressed and limbs akimbo. "B! B!"

Bruce startled to his feet and caught Tim before he tripped over himself. "Tim, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

Tim flung himself into Bruce's arms, smiling wider than he could remember since Haiti. "Dad's awake! He woke up! He's okay!"

Janet had called him thirty seconds ago to share the news, and as soon as the call ended Tim *had* to find his Bruce.

"That's great, chum," Bruce said, returning the hug. "This is wonderful news."

Tim purred, also for the first time since Haiti. “The doctors are looking over him, Mom is keeping him safe, and he’s not going to die. He’s awake Bruce. *Awake!”*

Tim wanted to cry. As soon as Jack was out of the hospital, Tim was putting a camping trip together for old time’s sake. Janet would help. It’d be how they thanked the universe for sparing Jack from death. The family bonding was *on.*

Bruce flattened Tim’s bed head and smiled. “We’ll have to celebrate once his diagnosis comes in. Why don’t you go tell the others? I’ll get Alfred to buy your favorite foods for dinner.”

Tim nodded, then unplastered himself from Bruce and darted out the door.

Cass was still MIA and Steph was at home, but Dick was here and Tim had Jason on speed dial. He’d gather them in a cinch.

As he jumped down the stairs two at a time, light shone through the open windows as the sun glistened on the February snow. It looked bright and beautiful, and almost half as wonderful as Tim felt.

***

Several hours later, Janet called back with updates from the hospital. The long and short of it was that Jack’s condition was not ideal. He was paralyzed from the waist down and could only stay awake for a few hours at a time. The doctors said exhaustion was normal after the strain his body went through, and that the Drakes should brace for a long recovery period.

“Six months to a year?” Tim said, hunched over his phone, watching Janet pace Jack’s hospital room like a tiger in a cage. “That’s not so bad.”

Of course, nothing was as bad as dying. Tim was just glad his dad could recover at all.

“Indeed,” Janet said. “In the wild, he would be too weak to survive. Luckily, I am here to ward off other dangers.” She bared her teeth, then made a clicking sound. “It is a shame I can’t do much

about the social ones humans wish to inflict him with. Making him see a therapist seems cruel."

Tim shuddered in complete agreement.

"Physical therapist, Jan," Jack said weakly from his bed. He was hooked up to an IV and several monitors, resembling a pin cushion. "They're not the same thing. Can I talk to my son?"

Janet walked over and handed him the phone, then fixed his blankets, muttering under her breath in a language Tim didn't recognize. She'd been fussing over Jack every two seconds, and had threatened to bite a nurse when they came in without warning. Tim felt another burst of pride; his mom was so good at guarding her hoard.

Jack's grip on the phone was shaky, so the screen wobbled. Tim barely noticed, too busy taking stock of his dad; Jack looked a second away from falling back asleep, and there were new lines on his face. It was like someone washed over him with a gray scale stain and wrung the water out of him.

Tim's happiness began to curdle.

"You okay, kiddo?" Jack said, smiling wanly. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Don't say that," Tim said, curling his fists. "That's not funny. You almost—"

A small, alien sound tried to escape his throat, but Tim bit it back. If he'd been even an hour later, the only people the hospital would've contacted would've been the funeral home.

"I almost *lost* you," Tim said, hugging himself with his free hand. "You can't make jokes about that, Dad."

Tim couldn't bear to lose his family. He'd been sneakily domesticated into caring about both his parents, even his draconic one. It was a subversion of the natural order, but Tim didn't care. He just needed both of them to be okay.

“Hey, no, it’s okay, I’m right here,” Jack said. “No jokes, I promise. I’ll be right as rain, Tim. The doctors said I’ve got a good shot at full recovery. I’ll be running around in no time.”

He tried to flex his arm, but couldn’t get it high off the bed. Janet quickly laced her fingers through his and made a distressed sound. Tim tried to keep his feelings in his stomach. Janet wasn’t supposed to make those noises. It was wrong. Everything about this was wrong.

“I’ll be fine,” Jack said again, more to himself. “It’s just going to take me a while to get back on my feet.”

“Yeah,” Tim said, clearing his throat. Not blinking was hard.

On screen, Janet fidgeted with Jack’s IV to make sure there were no crinks in the tubing. Her right hand’s pinky and ring fingers were gone, along with a chunk of her palm. Tim swallowed again, tasting phantom blood.

Why had he been so excited earlier? Just because Jack was awake didn’t mean things would go back to how they used to be.

“Never mind me. Your mom told me how brave you were,” Jack said, still smiling. “I don’t think I can ever tell you how proud I am of you, son. You saved—”

“Can we not?” Tim said.

Jack paused, eyebrows creeping up. Janet looked at the camera, brow furrowed.

“What?” Jack asked.

Tim buried his face into the hollow of his shoulder, ignoring the burning in his eyes. The background noise from the hospital were a thousand clicks and beeps and whirs from the machines counting Jack’s vitals. They were louder than church bells.

“Tim, are you alright?” Jack asked after a moment. “You seem . . . Peaked.”

“I’m fine,” Tim mumbled.

So what if he couldn’t sleep? Who cared if lately food looked less appetizing than wet cement? Or that Tim’s appearance was getting as scraggly as a street cat? Hygiene was a human concept that Tim wasn’t subscribing to at the moment. He had bigger things to worry about, like his dad’s delusions.

Tim hadn’t saved *anybody,* not really. He should’ve been faster, stronger, better at fighting—anything—so that his parents could’ve left that encounter in one piece instead of at death’s door. He didn’t want Jack’s gratitude when all Tim felt was upset.

“. . . Maybe you should come down to see me,” Jack said at length.

The suggestion was lightning on the ocean, painfully bright and wickedly painful, begging Tim to say yes. He wanted to so, so much, but—

Tim shied away from the phone screen. “No. Not a good idea.”

“Tim?” His dad said. “Sweetheart, I think it could help put you at ease. You and your mother don’t like being apart from your hoards, so if you need to see me—”

“No!” Tim snapped.

He glared at the floor, ignoring the tapered claws he’d accidentally shifted his hands into. He didn’t want them there, but it was too hard to change them back. He was too emotional—he was losing control, and this was just a phone call. He *couldn’t* see Jack in this condition. It was the bad idea to end all bad ideas.

“Tim, please talk to me,” Jack said. “You’re worrying me. Did I do something?”

“No, I—” Tim’s words got stuck in his throat.

“Hatchling?” Janet said softly.

Tim glanced at his mother, who looked uncharacteristically concerned. What he wouldn’t give to listen to her heartbeat too.

“Just get better,” Tim said. “If you’re okay, I will be too.”

That was how it worked. His hoard was happy, so he was happy. It was that simple. Tim’s heart and head needed to remember that.

“Tim—” Jack began.

Tim ended the call. The room echoed with his dad’s cut-off words.

Tim squeezed his phone so hard he cracked the case, and finally let himself blink. He was glad he’d waited so long; his eyelashes were soaked with unshed tears.

He curled himself into a ball in the corner, wrapping his arms over his knees as he imitated an egg. He hated this. Stupid emotions. They needed to stay in their lane.

If he were human, this wouldn’t be a problem. He could be at the hospital right now, tucked against his dad, listening the the heart-rate monitor beeping steadily and not have to worry about hurting his mom. If he hadn’t been born with this stupid, overly-aggressive DNA, it would be easy to be with his family.

“I hate this,” Tim said, unable to curl his hands into fists against without cutting himself on his claws. “I hate *me.”*

If he'd just been born normal, everything would be better.

***

Bruce knocked on Tim's door a little later and shuffled inside. Tim was in bed again, staring at the window.

"I heard you had a rough afternoon," Bruce said, sitting next to him. "Jack wanted me to check up on you."

"I'm fine," Tim said, glaring at the trees. They were coated in ice, like diamonds.

"It's okay if you're not," Bruce said.

"Too bad. I *am."*

Bruce sighed. Tim ignored him. He was good at that. It was a special dragon skill. Probably the only good one, to be honest. Everything else Tim was good at revolved around hurting people.

"Everyone is coming over for dinner," Bruce said. "Jason promised to bring illegal fireworks to celebrate your dad's recovery."

Tim continued to ignore him. Screw the celebratory dinner. Tim didn't deserve happiness to exist around him right now. He wanted to wallow.

"Do you want me to ask Max if Bart can come over?" Bruce said, running a hand through Tim's hair. It was starting to get long. "We can get your team here for the weekend. Even the retired ones."

Tim's fingers twitched. He hadn't seen his long-distance hoard members since . . . Since . . . A while ago. They'd been texting him, but Bart had been dealing with an evil twin from the future, and Kon had said something about an evil clone named Match in his last vent thread, so neither had

been over in a hot minute. As for Cassie, she'd spent winter break in Themyscira with Wonder Woman and had been focusing on the Titans. Tim didn't want to bother her when he knew hero work was basically her hoard.

Bruce's offer was tempting. Too tempting. If Tim said yes, he'd be grinning from ear to ear all weekend.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "I think I just want to be alone."

Bruce didn't say anything for a couple minutes, but after a while he put a hand on Tim's back.

"Okay, champ," he said. "If that's what you want. But you should talk to your dad again. He's very concerned."

Tim nodded and hid his face under the covers until Bruce left.

He didn't want to be worried over. He just wanted to be someone else.

***

Tim managed to get out of dinner with his hoard—who were confused why he'd excitedly called them over only to hide in his room—as well as school the next day. When the Waynes got determined to roust him out in the morning, Tim wedged a chair in the room and hid in the vents, foiling their plans. He was ignoring everything right now; slug mode reigned supreme.

Unfortunately, Tim couldn't turn off his ears, so he heard Bruce tell Dick, Jason, and Steph that Tim was having mood swings again, so they should leave him to process in peace. Tim was offended. *Mood swings.* They didn't even have the dignity to call it brooding.

It was Alfred who made him get out of his funk. Evil, treacherous butler. Tim should've been allowed to wallow as long as he wanted, but the butler didn't let him stay hidden in his room, phone turned off so he wouldn't see his dad's wall of concerned texts. No, Alfred kicked down the

barricade, marched inside, and flung open the curtains, letting in the hateful morning light like the sadist he was.

“You are not allowed to be sad in here anymore,” Alfred said sternly. “If you want to be miserable, you will do so in the kitchen with me. Is that clear?”

“No,” Tim said, burying himself in the dark recesses of his covers. “I want my mattress.”

“You have not eaten in far too long,” Alfred said. “Get up and have breakfast, or I shall turn on one of master Dick’s favorite reality TV shows and hide the remote.”

Tim glared and slithered out of bed.

In the kitchen, Alfred bundled him up in a blanket and served him licorice tea and crackers. Tim picked at them unenthusiastically from the window nook, wishing he could hibernate through the rest of winter, and possibly his life. Sentience sucked.

“Your father is worried,” Alfred said.. “I do believe he would have broken out of the hospital were he in a better condition. It would do you good to speak with him.”

Tim pressed his face against the window, letting the cool glass soak into his face. “No thanks.”

If he talked with Jack, he’d want to see him in person, and when he remembered he couldn’t it would only make things a thousand times worse, and then Tim’s hands would turn back into claws even though he didn’t want to shift again *ever,* and it’d start Slug Mode Extreme back up again.

Alfred sighed, “Very well. We won’t rush it. Though I do wish you’d tell us what is bothering you.”

Tim grunted but didn’t answer. *He* had a hard enough time figuring out what was wrong with his head. Trying to tell someone else would be torture.

“Miss Barbara is coming over to visit you this afternoon,” Alfred said after a moment, preparing a sandwich that Tim suspected he’d also be required to eat. “You will listen to her, and make sure she is not overworking herself.”

Tim cleared his throat. “Overworking?”

Alfred nodded. “She and Master Dick have had to delay their wedding. It was meant to be on Valentine’s Day, but due to the circumstances they’ve moved it to spring. Hardly an issue, but there has been much rearranging of schedules, and the rogues are seldom considerate of that. There has been *another* Arkham breakout.”

“Oh,” Tim said.

The circumstances . . . That meant Haiti, didn’t it? Dick and Babs hadn’t even mentioned the change in wedding dates. Tim had been too wrapped up in his own problems to notice. He’d missed Dick’s birthday too. He hadn’t given his bendy human a present.

Tim felt very small. He wished Cass were there to give him a hug.

“I’ll keep an eye on Babs,” Tim said quietly. “I need to take better care of her.”

Her and the rest of his humans. Tim was a juvenile, but that was no excuse for being such a bad hoard keeper, even if he was being constantly overwhelmed with emotions. He had to pull himself together.

“You do that,” Alfred said, setting the sandwich in front of Tim. It was peanut butter, marshmallows, and anchovies. Tim’s favorite. “And we’ll do the same for you, no matter how much you insist on digging your heels in. Understand, master Tim?”

Tim nodded glumly and picked up the sandwich. It tasted perfect.

***

Like Alfred, Babs was evil. When she visited later in the afternoon, she lured Tim out of his lair and let him poke and prod her for fives minutes before swatting him away and pulling out her laptop. She tricked him with the promise of a fun video game, then struck when his guard was down and put the entire room on lockdown by hacking the manor's security.

"Stop pulling a Bruce," Tim said, looking in vain for an exit. "Free me!"

Steel shutters had lowered over the windows, the doors were locked, and there weren't any vents big enough for him to fit through. This was like the panic room incident all over again. What was with the Bats and imprisoning dragons? This was inhumane!

"No, I don't think I will," Babs said. "The Waynes may be happy to let you fester for days on end, but I'm putting my foot down. We're having a chat."

"No!" Tim said with an offended gasp. Another horrible, evil hoard member betraying him. What was the world coming to?

"Yes," Babs said. "Don't bother resisting. I've been dealing with Bruce for over a decade, and you're nothing compared to him. I'm perfectly willing to stay in here until either you crack or we starve to death, so take your pick. I've got all day."

On one hand, waiting this out would be easy. Tim could survive way longer than Babs without food or water. On the other, he couldn't bear for Babs to starve and she knew it. Well played.

He sat on the floor, staying stubbornly human even though he wanted to lash his tail back and forth. He really, *really* didn't want to transform. It made him think of Haiti, which made him think of Janet, which made him remember biting her fingers off. Not a good time.

"You can't make me do anything," Tim said. "I'm taking a vow of silence, starting now. Starve on your curiosity."

He'd play the stoic, taciturn angle, then destroy her laptop when Babs got bored. Without the Internet she'd go mad within an hour, giving Tim his chance to escape.

Babs wheeled over to him and sighed. Tim startled as she patted his head, working his fingers into his hair. It felt unfairly good.

“I’m not trying to sate my curiosity,” she said. “Jack is freaking out. Janet too, I think. It’s harder to tell with her. You need to let them know why you’re not talking to them so they don’t kamikaze the manor.”

“It’s none of their business,” Tim snapped. “Or yours.”

He eyed the laptop, his ticket to freedom. It would be so easy to break. Babs scratched his scalp again, and Tim instinctively melted into it.

“It is when we’re part of your hoard,” she said, unimpressed. “Caring goes both ways. You’re not an island, Tim.”

“Duh,” he mumbled. Stupid metaphors.

“I’m serious, kiddo,” Babs said softly. “You’re our dragon; our rabid little maniac who never knows when to quit, always too excited to stop or think about consequences. I know it’s frustrating to be henpecked by people when you want to be alone, but sometimes you need a gentle shove to get out of a rut.”

“More like a body-slam of a cliff,” Tim muttered.

Babs lightly rapped her knuckles on his head. “You know what I mean. This is an intervention on your horrible coping mechanisms.”

Tim looked away, equal parts angry and touched. He did *not* have bad coping mechanisms. He just couldn’t rely on his dragon ones right now since they wanted him to eat his mom.

“You’re always going above and beyond for us,” Babs continued. “We just want to know how we can help *you.”*

Stupid, awful emotions, they were making him feel vulnerable when he wanted to hold onto his irritation.

“You don’t have to do anything,” Tim said, poking his finger into the spoke of one of her wheels. “I don’t . . . I just want to pretend nothing’s wrong.”

For a few hours after Jack woke up, Tim had forgotten his worries, but now there were too many things to think about, and his usual habit of ignoring them wasn’t working. Maybe because the things he *did* like—his hoard, his family, his humans—were so tangled up in the bad.

Babs hummed. Her nails were filed into half moons and smelled like polish, but the rest of her reminded Tim of the Clocktower.

“You’re not doing a good job, if that’s the case,” she said. “I haven’t had you leave dead rats in my fridge all month and it’s weirding me out.”

Tim made a sad sound. He wished it *were* a few months ago, when all he’d been worried about was keeping Dick from making him do homework and hiding coffee from Alfred. He hadn’t been waking up tasting his mom’s blood in his mouth. Hadn’t hated the part of himself that he used to love, all because it was why he couldn’t be in the hospital with his mom and dad. Those were good days.

“It’s okay if you don’t know what to say,” Babs said. “I’ll help you find the words. We all will. You just have to let us.”

Tim wanted to bristle. Force of habit said he didn’t need help. He could take care of himself. It was what he was born to do . . . Except, he hadn’t been, lately. His emotions had hit him like a train, and he still hadn’t gotten off the tracks.

Slowly, he reached up and pinched the hem of Babs’ sleeve.

Everything was topsy turvy. He was sad instead of vengeful. Tired when he should be fanatic. His wires had been crossed, and the parts of himself he'd been taught to rely on weren't there. Dragons were supposed to do everything alone, but the more Tim isolated himself, the more miserable he became.

"Okay," Tim whispered.

Maybe it was time to change that.

***

Making the phone call was an hour long process. Tim couldn't remember the last time he had to psyche himself up to call his parents. If this wasn't proof he was in the twilight zone, he didn't know what was. Eventually, he forced himself to press the buttons, ignoring the one thousand three-hundred and twenty-eight messages his dad had sent over the last 30ish hours.

Jack answered on the first ring. "Tim?"

"Hi," Tim said. His voice cracked, so he cleared his throat. "I didn't think you'd be up."

He'd hoped to leave a voice message, which was why he called during the dead hours.

"Are you alright?" Jack said. "Do you need help? I can be there in a jiffy. I just need to steal a wheelchair—oh, sorry Jan. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Timothy?" Janet's voice was froggy. "It is three in the morning."

"Hi, Mom," Tim said softly. "Sorry, you can go back to bed."

"Nonsense," she said. There was the scratch of claws on a screen, then the call switched to video. Janet and Jack were lit by the machines beeping in Jack's hospital room and a floor light that was

spilling in from the hallway. Her eyes glowed pale and colorless in the dark. “We haven’t had a proper meeting in far too long. It has been an appalling wrench in my schedule.”

That was Janet-speak that she missed talking to him. Tim’s heart swelled.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” he said roughly. “What’s the point of a routine if nobody sticks to it?”

“Precisely,” she said. “I knew you’d understand, hatchling.”

Tim leaned against the wall. He was curled in the corner by his bed, with only a lamp on his desk to light the room. His parents looked so much older, he didn’t know how to feel about that. Jack had seemed to age ten years in a month. There was more gray in his hair and a tiredness in his face. Even the gleam in his eyes seemed a little less bright. And Janet . . . There just seemed to be less of her.

“I’m sorry I ignored you,” Tim said. “I was feeling things, but I didn’t want to think about them, so I took it out on you. That wasn’t right. I—I hurt you both.”

Janet made a disagreeable sound, but Jack shushed her.

“I made a mistake too,” Jack said. “I shouldn’t have pushed you to visit. You know your limits better than I do.” He looked at Janet, then back at Tim. “You both do. It was wrong of me to suggest meeting in person when you’re so fragile.”

“I’m not fragile, and I *want* to see you,” Tim said. “Not just on a screen. I *miss* you.”

He couldn’t smell them from here, or nuzzle their skin, or feel their pulses. They were just pictures on a small screen, too far away to be real.

“I just want to hug you,” Tim said. “But if I try, I might hurt you. So, I have to stay away.”

It always came down to the three of them trying so hard to be together, then having to scatter so they wouldn't fall apart. Tim hadn't minded when he was younger, but Younger Tim hadn't known how scary it was to wake up and not know if his parents would ever leave the hospital.

"Only for a little while," Jack said. "Once you and Jan are right as rain, we can try again. You've just had bad scares, that's all. Give it time, son."

"We don't *have* time," Tim said. "You almost died. For a little bit I thought—I thought you did. What if I never get to hug you again?"

"You will," Jack said. "I promised your mother I'd live for a long, long time, and I intend to keep it. Thing are going to be okay, Tim. I've got you and Jan looking out for me, and the Waynes taking care of you. We'll get through this together. Just give yourself time."

Tim buried his head in his shoulder. He didn't want to do that. It sounded frustrating and slow. He wanted to make this better *now*. In the wild, if a dragon was in trouble they either died or triumphed. Why did humanity have to be so complicated?

"I'm done being emotional," Tim said after a moment. "Babs made me practice, but I'm tired now."

She'd made him draw a "feelings tree" and bribed him with a new video game, so he'd reluctantly complied with her evil demands, but it'd been exhausting. His emotions were bottled up like soda in a too-small can. Any second they could explode, so why tempt fate by twisting the cap?

"Alright, then let's just talk," Jack said. His hand shook, so Janet steadied the phone. "Why don't you tell me what you've been up to? I've missed our phone calls."

Tim wondered how, since Jack had been unconscious this whole time. Maybe it was a metaphor. Humans liked those.

He cleared his throat, then started catching Jack up on the things his missed. Since Tim had been pretty out of it lately, it was mostly memes Steph sent him, and her unholy reign of terror as Gotham's latest Robin.

“She replaced Mad Hatter’s hat with a dunce cap a couple days ago,” Tim said. “It was really funny. And before that she helped Jason catch a trafficking ring by the docks. His goons really like her, I think. One of them gave her a Subway gift card.”

She hadn’t been in her new uniform long, but lots of people liked her. Especially Tim. Steph somehow made it feel like nothing had changed, even though everything had. When she was talking to him, he could forget about his worries for a little while.

Funnily enough though, Bruce didn’t like patrolling with her. He’d rarely done so when she was Spoiler, and Tim was starting to think that was a good thing. He and Steph clashed like fire and ice. Even Jason raised an eyebrow at some of their arguments. *Jason.* It was irony at it’s finest.

“And here I thought you’d never stop running around in your costume,” Jack said fondly, when Tim was done relaying all the what’s what. “That was very generous of you to share.”

Tim ducked his head to stop from preening. He’d never let just anyone borrow his uniform, but Steph was allowed. She had all the dibs. Still, it was nice that Jack knew how big a deal that was. He could appreciate dragon stuff, mostly.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Tim said. “I’ll be back out in no time. You’ll see.”

Jack smiled. Beside him, Janet was quiet, but she never took her eyes off Tim. He wondered if she was also as scared of losing him as he was her. Maybe, since they were both weirdo dragons that’d spent too long around humans, they were *both* trying to hoard each other. Maybe he was the same kind of precious to her as she was to him.

He’d have to ask later, when he was ready to try being emotional again. For now, he kept chattering about school, his hoard, and whatever random things he could think of, and pretended everything was normal.

It wasn’t better yet, but it would be. Tim just needed to give it time.

***

Except, some things really shouldn’t wait.

“Mom?” Tim said, whispering into the phone an hour later, after Jack was asleep again. “We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

I swear next chapter is going to be happier. I need a break from Tim's Sad Boy Hours. 😂

Also, I'm proud to report that I've got my sibling hooked on the Tim Special sandwich. They've been craving lately, so I need to buy more sardines.

Meanwhile, deep in the jungle:

Cass: Months of no memes, days of hiking hitch, hours bored. All worth it to fight you.
Shiva: I don’t even know you. In fact, I’m rather busy right now destroying this cult before their ritual succeeds and opens a portal to the spirit world. Go away.
Cass: Never. Pay my child support.
Shiva: What?
Cass *ripping off her cowl*: I am Cass Cain. You are my mother. Prepare to die!

Mamma's Boy

Chapter Summary

Tim and Janet scheme, as they are wont to do.

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentine's Day! If you had a great night with a loved one, congrats! But know you'll still never top the high of being 8 years old and overdosing on chalky candy sweethearts after eating your body weight in cheap chocolate. This holiday's glory is given to the children.

If you're single like me (or sick, also like me lol) here are some happy fun dragon shenanigans to celebrate. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There weren't a lot of ways dragons showed affection to each other. By that, Tim meant "practically none." His kind were notoriously wary of each other, if not downright hateful. Perhaps it was because of the danger of encountering a predator that was as lethal as them, or maybe it was the fear of them stealing the other's hoard.

Now, Tim thought it could be because, out of all the creatures in the world, hoarding another dragon was one of the most challenging, unrewarding things a person could do. See exhibit A, him and Janet Drake.

"Come on, *please* tell me," Tim said for what felt like the hundred time. "Please please please please—"

Janet hissed an angry threat in draconic in him, just quiet enough not to wake up Jack.

"You suck," Tim growled, then added. "Not really. But my point stands!"

Janet arched an eyebrow, unmoved. She didn't want to talk about São Paulo, and punctuated that with a stubbornness that Tim hated being on the other end of.

He never should have hoarded his mother, she was impossible and annoying and didn't *listen.* He'd have been better off collecting socks. They were more understanding, and way less stingy with information.

"As I've said before," she drawled. "I am not speaking into these vile electric boxes. They are not safe."

"This is an Oracle phone," Tim said, shaking his cellphone, "it's the safest one in the world."

Tim had even modified it to help with his own mischief. There wasn't a more perfect line of communication for him and his mother to use.

"No," Janet said.

Tim muttered several choice death threats in draconic and gave her his best pout.

Janet was again unmoved, because she didn't have a heart and was made of pure evil.

"You said you'd tell me," Tim said, unable to hide the hurt in his voice. "You promised."

Janet never broke her promises. That was crass and pathetic, and she was neither. How was Tim supposed to keep her as a role model if she didn't model any roles for him?

Janet huffed in irritation, absently running her hand through Jack's hair. He was laid up in bed, fast asleep beside her, and was snoring softly. The monitors next to him showed his vitals, confirming that he wasn't faking.

"I will tell you," she said. "But only in a secure fashion."

"Yeah?" Tim said sarcastically. "Do we have one of those?"

Last he checked, meeting face to face wasn't an option. If phones were out, that left them with the longest tin can-and-yarn phone in the world, and Janet would probably think that could be hacked too.

"Of course we do, silly child," Janet said. "We simply must be creative."

"I'm not silly," Tim said, offended. *Jack* was silly. Tim was dignified and sophisticated.

"Of course not, hatchling," Janet said dryly.

The endearment made him blush. She'd been calling him hatchling more often. Tim would never, *ever* admit to liking it though, since Janet was being a jerk.

"What's your solution then, mother dearest?" he said.

"Simple," she said, and told him her plan.

***

The plan had two steps, which was more than Tim had been expecting. Janet's usual response to problems was to eat or destroy them, so he was proud of the effort she put into this scheme. It reminded him of their elaborate attempts to keep Jack away from Gotham when Tim was younger, only sneakier.

The not-so-fun part of Janet's plan was that Tim had to play things cool around his hoard so they wouldn't suspect anything. Knowing them, they'd butt in and ruin the hard work he and Janet were putting into this scheme. If that happened, Janet would either pull the plug on the whole operation, leaving Tim in the dark forever, or his hoard would discover what she was hiding.

That was a no-go. Janet had been explicitly clear; no humans allowed, especially not hoards. Even more especially, not Jack. She would be cross if their humans overheard anything, and by cross she

meant apocalyptically angry. Tim didn't want to see his mom mad, so he was taking his duties very seriously.

Step one of Sneaky Time was convincing the Bats he wasn't "brooding," having "mood swings," or "pulling a Bruce" anymore. They needed to think he was well-adjusted and happy again so they'd lower their guards. Step two couldn't happen until they did.

"B," Tim said, leaning in the entry-way of Bruce's study. "Are you going into the office today?"

Bruce looked up from his computer and adjusted his reading glasses. "No, I'm taking another family day."

Tim frowned. "But there's a board meeting at two."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "I can do it virtually."

Tim scuffed the floor. Bruce had been working from home a lot, which interfered with The Plan.

"I can go with you to the meeting," Tim said, "You know, if you're nervous about leaving home unarmed or whatever."

Bruce raised his other eyebrow. If Tim didn't know better, he'd say the man looked both bemused and concerned. "I thought you hated going to WE."

Tim shrugged. "I hate busy work. It's different."

Being an interned desk-slave had been boring and awful. If he'd been allowed to do fun projects like rearrange the fiscal budget, Tim would've been happy as a clam at WE. Alas, he'd been a glorified gopher.

"I just think it'd be nice to get out of the house, is all," Tim said, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. "Fresh air, you know? It's been a while since I went outside."

Please take the bait. He needed Bruce to get back to his normal routine and stop micromanaging Tim's existence. His scheme depended on it.

Bruce walked over and wrapped Tim in a half-hug.

"Fresh air sounds like a great idea, champ," Bruce said. "Let's make a day of it."

The Dark Knight had that small, half-moon smile that he only ever used around family. Tim smiled back on impulse and leaned into the embrace. Bruce smelled like expensive cologne, but underneath was the familiar scent of the Batcave.

"Okay, let's visit Lucius while we're there," Tim said. "Tam is still mad at him, so I want to rearrange his office supplies."

Bruce chuckled as he shook his head. "As long as you don't rearrange too much, it should be fine."

Tim purred and rubbed his cheek against Bruce's shoulder. Even though it was for The Plan, Tim suspected he'd enjoy the afternoon quite a bit.

***

The next day, Tim continued his scheme by visiting Jason at MWS Books. As he stepped up to the front door, Tim silently shook his head over why his zombie still insisted on working here. He must really like the smell of moldy paper, weirdo.

Tim froze on the threshold. Jason wasn't at the register. Instead, a beefy blond guy manned the counter. A *familiar* blond man.

War flashbacks raced through Tim's brain as he took the man in: Pecs of steel, arms as thick as metal girders, a too-friendly smile. Oh no, oh *no*.

“Little dude!” Chad said, stepping away from the cash register to reveal a too-small *I’m Booked* T-shirt stretched over his muscles. “Far out. I didn’t know you came here. Give me one!”

He reached out to give him a side hug, which gave Tim *more* flashbacks of Dance Camp, followed by internal screaming. Tim mentally braced himself for an Ax Bodyspray scented reunion, but . . . weirdly, it didn’t come. Chad caught himself mid-movement, coughed a laugh, and held out his hand for a fist bump instead.

“Put her there, little man,” he said, keeping more distance from Tim than usual.

Tim stared at him for a solid ten seconds before slowly, with much confusion, returning the fist bump.

Chad beamed like he’d just discovered Penicillin. “Thanks buddy! Anyway, what can I do for you? My aunt Jo is at lunch, but I can help you find a book.”

“Uh, no thanks,” Tim said. What was going on? Chad could *read?* Since when? Maybe the trauma of the last few months was making Tim hallucinate. It was a valid theory. “I’m actually looking for Jason. I mean, Peter. Or, uh, sometimes his friends call him Todd.”

Which alias was Jason using here again?

“Oh yeah, I think I’ve seen him around,” Chad said. “Big guy, skunk hair, super nerd?”

“Yup,” Tim said. That was Jason distilled to his essence.

“He stepped out to make some phone calls to his home dogs,” Chad said. “Something about a delayed shipment, I didn’t catch all of it. Anyway, he should be back soon. If you want to wait, I can sneak you some cookies from Aunt Jo’s stash.”

Free food? Well, maybe Tim could endure this guy a little longer. Joanne made good cookies.

Fifteen minutes later, Jason shouldered his way back into the shop and found Tim curled up in one off the armchairs, gnawing on a snickerdoodle like a chipmunk.

“Since when do you visit bookstores?” Jason asked, amused.

Tim looked up from his cookie, then back down. “You didn’t come to the manor for dinner yesterday.”

Tim had spent a glorious afternoon with Bruce, idly harassing Lucius by flaunting random details about Tam’s new life in Star City (details Lucius didn’t have because he and Tam weren’t on speaking terms right now) and being bothered by weirdly friendly board members, then came home and realized his zombie was *missing* from family game night. Missing! Hell was full of traitors, psychos, and Jason.

“Sorry, I had to deal with the Triads,” Jason said. “I texted Alfred about it.”

Tim didn’t say anything, too busy pouting. The only reason he hadn’t marched down to Crime Alley to drag Jason home by the ear yesterday was because Steph needed help organizing information on Gotham’s major crime families. She was still getting used to using the Robin profile on the Batcomputer, and had somehow gotten into *Bruce’s* contingency files. It had taken Tim over half an hour of coding to figure out how she’d snarled the database like that, and by then patrol had been over. Even Babs had been flummoxed when he’d sent her screenshots later.

Anyway, what mattered was that now Tim was suffering Jason withdrawal. The drug trade should *not* have been as important as hoard time.

Jason sighed. “You’re going to kill me again with the guilt-tripping, Timbuktu. Your Bambi eyes could be weaponized. Scoot over.”

Tim grumbled as he was squished into a corner of the chair. Jason was way too big to share a cushion with. Another thing to include on his itemized list of sins.

“I was going to come home later today, but if you’re going to stalk me, I might as well read aloud to you until the end of my shift,” Jason said, pulling a paperback out of his coat. “Brad or whatever his name is can watch the store for a while.”

Chad gave a double thumbs up from the counter. Tim eyed him suspiciously. Why was he so quiet today? Did Chads have a mute button? Was the man mutating into a new form?

Jason slung an arm around Tim and flipped to the first page of the book. Tim tried to see the title, but Jason blocked it.

“Let me see,” Tim hissed.

“And risk putting it in shredding range?” Jason said. “I don’t think so.”

Tim snapped his teeth at him. Jason was getting too good at predicting Tim’s next move.

“What’s it about?” Tim said, finally giving up. “It better not be a kissing book. I’ll sue.”

“Actually, it’s about dragons,” Jason said. “Some weird sculptor lady makes them out of clay. Apparently it’s pretty good, so pay attention.”

Fat chance. Tim was here for hoard time, nothing else.

“Don’t give me that look,” Jason said. “You don’t *have* to listen, but it’s a good break. You look like you could use one.”

“I’m fine,” Tim mumbled, but he was still recovering from slug mode and had less energy than usual. Convincing the Waynes he was okay was taking more energy than he’d expected. “But . . . I guess a few minute couldn’t hurt.”

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said with a small, slanted smile.

Chad set down another plate of cookies, then went to go help a customer. Jason scratched Tim's head as he read the weird, pottery-dragon book, and it started to snow outside. Tim's eyes drooped. Head scritches were his weakness. Consciousness was suddenly hard to maintain.

He slumped in his seat and let the sound of Jason's voice carry him away as he dreamed about stupid baby dragons cracking out of clay eggs, and sculptors who cooed over the clumsy reptiles in delight.

***

The day after that, Tim went on errands for Alfred.

The next day, school.

The following afternoon, Tim played online games with his friends. It was the entire team versus Impulse, who beat them without even trying, and Tim fell asleep halfway through the last game.

By the time the weekend rolled around, he felt positively chipper. Tim was still pretty tired (recovering from experiencing Emotions for over a month straight *sucked)* but there was nothing like quality hoard time to get a dragon back on their feet.

"I'm glad to hear that, kiddo," Jack said when Tim reported how much better he was feeling on Saturday video over call. "You've got color back in your cheeks."

Tim purred, getting comfier in Cass' beanbag. He'd been calling his parents every day. It was a good thing they weren't paying by the minute, or Drake Industries would go bankrupt.

In the background, Janet was poking one of the medical monitors, cocking her head to the side as she inspected it. She seemed uninterested in the conversation, which didn't surprise Tim since it was about emotions.

“At this rate, you’ll be back to school full-time fairly soon,” Jack said.

Tim scowled. “Way to burst my bubble, Dad. That sounds awful.”

He went a couple days a week and did the bare minimum on his remote stuff, and it was the worst part of being alive.

“Apologies,” Jack said, “I’m just a little worried about your attendance. You’re not getting held back, are you?”

Tim thought about it.

“No,” he said.

He had no idea.

“Hmm, well, then it’s fine, I guess,” Jack said, then yawned. “As for me, my recovery is going well. I’ll be starting physical therapy next week. I hope once I get some meat back on my bones, I won’t be so tired.”

Tim cocked his head to the side. “I thought you already started?”

Jack shook his head. “The hospital staff has been giving me a few exercises, but I’m more or less bed bound. Plus, your mother keeps changing her mind about which clinic we should go to. There was one in Gotham that looked promising, but she put her foot down.”

“Of course I did,” Janet scoffed. “You deserve the best, not something merely *adequate.”*

She said the word like it was dirty gum on her bare foot.

“Yeah,” Tim said, of the same opinion. “You should value yourself more, Dad.”

He was always chattering on about self-esteem to Janet and Tim, it was time he put his money where his mouth was. Jack Drake was only allowed to have the best of the best. Anyone who disagreed did so on pain of death via Tim and Janet.

“Alright, alright,” Jack said fondly, “I’ll do that.” He turned to his wife. “But you need to see a specialist too, Jan. We need to get you fitted for a prosthetic.”

Janet flexed her injured hand dubiously, so blatantly unexcited that even Tim picked up on it.

“Fake fingers?” she said. “I am not interested.”

Jack made sad eyes at her. After a few minutes, she deflated and muttered a “fine, if you insist,” that made Tim sigh with relief.

Janet deserved nice things too. Although . . . trusting a normal doctor to make her prosthetic rubbed Tim the wrong way. Those nerds probably didn’t even make interesting fake body parts.

His hand twitched. Tim eyed the scratch-pad on his desk.

Designing a few minor appendages couldn’t be that hard, could it?

***

On Monday, Tim sat at the Batcomputer, bored out of his mind.

“Hey, O?” Tim said, flicking through the security feeds on the politician’s office that had been bugged. “Do you think I can patrol with Steph and B sometime soon?”

The channel was quiet for a few minutes, then Babs' voice crackled through. "I don't know, Tim. Let's wait and see a bit longer."

His shoulders slumped. "I'm doing better."

"I know," she said. "But let's let Steph keep the limelight for a bit, okay? She's having a lot of fun as Robin."

Tim looked at the security feed, where Steph was gesturing violently at Bruce as they snuck through the bugged office. It was too dark to see if she was signing anything, but there were definitely some middle fingers pointed at the Dark Knight's back.

"Yeah," Tim said. "Clearly."

He went back to monitoring the feeds, a little disappointed. If Babs didn't trust him in the suit yet, his plan wasn't working at all.

***

"Are you sure we don't need to alter the plan?" Tim said later that night, cloistered in the attic. He'd commandeered Cass' favorite beanbag again.

"Quite," Janet said. "All is well. We just have to be patient, no matter how horrid that is."

Tim picked at a loose thread on his sweat pants. That wasn't the answer Tim wanted to hear. He wanted action.

"Think of it as a hunting activity," Janet said. "Chases are amusing, but the majority of kills occur when you can lure your victim into false security, then strike from their blind spot."

"Fine," Tim said unhappily. "How are things on your end?"

It was Janet's turn to pull a face. "Tedious. Your father won't let me buy an MRI machine."

Janet was starting to hoard medical equipment, which Tim was in favor of. Trust Jack to get stingy about that. *Bruce* had an MRI machine, and if he could have one Janet deserved one too.

"Aside from that, he believes I am recovering as well," Janet said. "Silly man."

"Very," Tim said.

Janet had been wandering the halls like a homicidal wraith—terrifying the hospital staff—to show Jack that she could be trusted out of his line of sight. Her record was half an hour away from him before the paranoia took over. Everything was progressing on schedule.

"Do you really think this will work?" Tim said, biting his lip. "I mean, once we get to phase two?"

Tim didn't doubt they could fool their humans. The problems came after.

Janet made a soothing sound into the phone.

"You'll do fine, hatchling," she said. "Just stick to the plan."

"Wouldn't need a plan if you just *told me,"* Tim muttered, quelling his squishy feelings. The endearment was still an instant-blush. He couldn't build resistance to it.

Janet clicked her tongue, but being almost murdered by a cult leader meant Janet was justified in whatever suspicions she had, and there was no way Tim could convince her to give them up.

He eyed her hand again. The prosthetic he was working on was almost ready; it just had to be shipped to the hospital, and then Janet's limb would look *cool* instead of strange.

“Hey, I know Dad is getting better,” Tim said softly. “But are you okay, Mom?”

He didn’t usually ask how she was doing. That was a forbidden question because it involved emotions. But did she have phantom pain? Or forget those fingers weren’t there? Some lizards could grow back tails, but Tim didn’t think Yinlongs regrew limbs. Losing part of himself forever sounded awful. Not as bad as losing hoard, but awful.

“You and Jack are fine, so I am too,” Janet said simply. “You two are all I require to be happy. Just stay in one piece, hatchling, and I will have nothing to complain about.”

You two.

“No promises,” Tim said softly, “but I’ll do my best.”

“Hm,” she said. “I suppose that will have to do.”

Tim smiled as she ended the call.

***

A few days later, after sending the prototype for a Janet-friendly prosthetic to Bludhaven on an express courier, Tim decided it was time to enact phase two of their mother-son scheme.

“I’m going out,” Tim said, bundled in every jacket that had been within stealing range. It was -18 degrees today, so he was protesting the weather by dressing in too many layers.

Alfred looked up from the bread he was kneading.

“Am I to inquire where you are going?” Alfred asked. Although his expression was unchanged, he looked pleased. The butler must have thought he was truly on the mend. All according to plan.

“No,” Tim said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Official dragon business. But you have to call me if something happens, okay? Like, immediately. I need to know if there are any enemy dragons nearby so I can kill them.”

Or worse things, like guidance counselors or therapists. Tim would eliminate them with extreme prejudice.

Alfred continued kneading the dough. “I will be sure to do that, young master. Rest assured, if a winged, fire-breathing lizard bursts through the windows, you will be the first to know.”

It was obviously sarcasm, but Tim relaxed anyway.

“Good,” he said. “See you later.”

He headed for the garage and grabbed his motorcycle keys. It was time to take the Redbird for a spin.

***

Half an hour later, Bludhaven’s skyline approached, a cluster of brutalist and gothic buildings staining the landscape as thick smog hovered in a haze in all directions. Gotham’s sister city was rotten to the core in a way that *almost* felt like home. Tim could see why Dick set up shop there for several years; it wasn’t Gotham, but it came close.

Jack and Janet’s clinic was on the outskirts of the city, barely Bludhaven. Tim stopped his bike three miles from the facility and held his breath so he wouldn’t breathe in Janet’s scent. In theory, he could’ve come nearer. In practice, this already felt too close.

Tim wasn’t an idiot. This was risky business. He could barely manage his human emotions. His dragon ones were even worse, and they were wrathful in their rawness. Bruce *still* wasn’t letting him out as Robin, choosing to risk Steph’s brand of chaos over Tim’s bouts of instinctive violence. Meeting up with Janet now of all times was suicidal.

Which is why he wouldn't be meeting her. Technically.

Tim got off the bike, scanning the foliage on the shoulder of the road for claw marks or singes. It wouldn't be obvious. Unlike normal territory markers, this was supposed to be subtle.

His eyes snagged on a fresh, crooked wound slashed into an an aspen. The bark bled dark, coppery red sap. It looked vaguely like a T.

A bird cried somewhere in the distance. Tim's skin prickled as he stomped toward the aspen, wading through a storm drain ditch full of cattails. A misstep made him yelp and inhale in surprise as his leg was soaked up to his calf.

Tim's head spun; breathing had been a mistake. Janet had agreed to come an hour ago to do her part of the plan, but it smelled so strongly of her that he almost thought she was *still* here. His mouth was already pooling with venom, teeth sharpening with the promise of a fight.

The only reasons dragons left their territory was to expand it or mate. Tim wasn't doing the latter (obviously) but the former seemed so natural, so easy, to do. Bludhaven could make an excellent addition to his hoard, if only he could get rid of the competition.

"Bad dragon," Tim whispered, shaking himself out of it. "Bad, stupid dragon."

That was *not* why he came here. His mom was off-limits.

He shook his pant leg, now soaked from the ditch, and inspected the aspen. At first glance it was normal, but closer inspection revealed its secrets.

"Bingo," Tim said as he plucked the letter from the branch it was tied to.

Janet Drake's sharp, elegant handwriting was looped across the envelope's front, and the paper smelled like her perfume. Not her natural scent, but the one that came in tiny glass bottles that Janet only wore occasionally out of boredom. She must've soaked the paper in it to dilute her draconic scent.

Tim breathed deeply, jaw clenched so he wouldn't get lost in the homicidal parts of his brain that were screeching at him. This was a good smell, not a fight smell.

He stuffed the letter in his pocket, then headed back for the bike. Now that he had what he came for, he needed to get away ASAP. He didn't know how much longer he could ignore the urge to dive bomb the clinic and go for his mother's throat, even though that was the last thing he wanted to do.

He revved the Redbird's engine to hide his growl. Honestly, this could've been so much easier, but *no,* Janet had to be difficult. She hadn't even wanted to risk a P.O box in case someone traced it, nor did she trust anyone alive or dead to play courier for her. As for venturing any farther from Jack, that was a pipe dream. Even three miles was pushing it.

"The things I do for hoard," he muttered, then headed back to Gotham.

Her anti-phone kick would be the death of him.

***

When he got home, Tim pulled out the letter. It was written in a hodge-podge of various languages and alphabets, which was a headache to mentally translate. Tim had to pull out a couple dictionaries to help with some of the words he didn't remember from Malay and Swahili, cursing Janet's fluency in pretty much every tongue. If he could go back in time, he'd destroy her Rosetta Stone collection so this code would be less annoying to solve.

When he did eventually decoded the letter, it was almost dinner time. Tim wasn't hungry though. Janet's account of São Paulo was brief and to the point. He wanted to praise her succinctness, but the contents were too alarming for Tim to be anything but panicked.

"Well, shit," Tim said. This explained the murder, paranoia, and everything else.

He was going to have to do something about this. Preferably something permanent, bloody, and soon, so his hoard wouldn't catch wind of it. Bruce probably wouldn't appreciate Tim's visceral

need to use scorched earth tactics on anything that endangered his family.

Maybe Janet and Tim could tag team this? If they made a verbal code for phone calls, they wouldn't have to leave letters on the edges of their territories to coordinate their contingencies. This could be a team effort. Mother-son bonding, dragon style—

Dick poked his head into the room. "Hey Tim, have you seen my—"

Tim squawked and shoved the letter into his mouth.

Dick stared at him.

Tim stared back as he chewed, then swallowed.

"What was that?" Dick asked.

"None of your business," Tim said. His mouth tasted like fountain pens and perfume.

Dick raised an eyebrow.

"It was edible, that's all that matters," Tim said, casual and chill. "What do you want?"

"I was going to ask if you've seen my sweater, but I think I just got my answer," Dick said, staring at the Nightwing hoodie Tim was wearing over the other clothes he'd stolen earlier. Steph's blouse was very comfy, although Jason's sweatpants were three sizes too big and had needed to be rolled up six times.

"*Our* sweater," Tim corrected, fiddling with the sleeves. "I own you, remember?"

“Sure, whatever you say,” Dick said dryly. “I’m just glad you’re feeling more chipper. Want to go over a cold case before dinner?”

Tim nodded like a bobble-head, then followed Dick down to the Batcave.

That had been close. Tim couldn’t afford his humans finding out about the letter. One, because then they’d know he’d gone and almost-visited Janet, and two, because then they’d want to know what it said.

Downstairs, Alfred was ironing Steph’s Robin uniform while she did gymnastics on the bars near the abyss. Bruce was conspicuously gone—probably still at work—so Tim slid into the Batchair with a purr. Comfiest chair in the cave.

“—and like, Leslie was so pissed off,” Steph was saying to Alfred. “I didn’t even need stitches, but she kept glaring at Bruce. Hilarious, right?”

“Indubitably, miss Stephanie,” Alfred said absently, working out another crease on the uniform.

“You got hurt?” Tim said in horror.

Steph rolled her eyes. “No, I was whining about some bruises to get a rise out of B while we were at the clinic, and she overreacted. It’s not even close to Jason’s death day, but she’s been on one about child soldiers lately, no clue why. Trust me, lizard boy, I’m right as rain.”

“Good,” Tim said. “You better stay that way.”

“Aye aye, captain snaky boi,” Steph said. She did another rotation on the bars, then went limp and let herself fall onto the mats.

“We’ll be fine, Tim,” Dick said as he powered up a Bat-laptop next to Tim. “Just focus on yourself for a while.”

“I’m genetically opposed to that, and culturally insulted as well,” Tim muttered, clicking on a random cold case to investigate. “I’m the last thing I want to worry about.”

Three synchronized sighs echoed off the cave, but luckily nobody started lecturing him about ‘boundaries,’ ‘self-esteem’ and other nonsense. Tim had *plenty* of esteem. Maybe not for his dragon half right now (he wasn’t transforming at all. Take that, DNA), but he knew how to look out for number one. Tim’s priority was and always would be keeping what mattered most to him safe. That included the life Jack Drake had painstakingly created for the Drake family.

“The Ferdinand murder?” Dick said, peering at Tim’s screen. “That’s a tough one. You sure you want to start something this difficult? It’ll drive you mad if you’re not in the right head space.”

“I’ll be fine,” Tim said. “I don’t mind a long-term problem. Sooner or later, I’ll figure it out.”

He flexed his fingers, deceptively human. No claws, scales, or sharp things broke through his skin, but Tim didn’t need those to be dangerous.

He glanced over the Ferdinand murder, but didn’t take any of it in. Another case was on his mind. A more personal one.

“Need any help?” Dick asked a few minutes later.

“No,” Tim said. “Focus on your own stuff. I’ve got this.”

His mom had been right to keep her cards close to her chest; some things were best left in the family, and there was no way in hell Tim was filling his hoard in on this secret.

Chapter End Notes

First off, I want to apologize for the accidental clickbait. 😅 When I came up with this arc, I immediately wrote down the scene where you find out what happened in Brazil, and that's set

in stone. Sorry, you must wallow in suspense a while longer. However, you got to see Janet and Tim be devious schemers, so I think it's a fair trade-off. 😉

Meanwhile, in a ruinous temple:

Shiva: Stop fighting me! I'll kill you after I murder this cult.
Cass: No! No more ignoring! Eighteen is years, too long. Justice now!
Shiva: It's been eighteen years, eight months, and fifteen days you ungrateful teenager. God, you'd think Cain would have at least kept track of your birthday after going through the trouble of forcing me to go to term.
Cass: . . . You know my birthday?
Shiva: No, I know the day I finally *wasn't pregnant* anymore. I never wanted y--
magical explosion, intense light show, and echoed chanting from beyond the veil
Cult leader: At least, transcendence is upon us! All will perish as worlds collide!
Cass: Uh oh, das not good.

A Steph in the Wrong Direction

Chapter Summary

No good deed goes unpunished, much to Tim's displeasure.

Chapter Notes

Hey, sorry it's been so long. The last few weeks have been rough; I've been sick almost the entire time, have been dealing with The Horrors, and am on the verge of burning out. You know it's bad when I can't even find the energy to write Silly Dragon Boy. (everything else I've been posting was pre-written).

Anyway, hope you guys enjoy this snippet. I wish I had a countdown to Damian's arrival, but unfortunately that's impossible since I keep adding scenes. Just know his time will come soonish. 😅

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of the downsides to being a giant flying lizard of death was that Tim needed a lot of rest, especially in winter. Generally, he was able to ignore his body's needs (vigilantism stopped for no dragon), but tonight was not one of those nights. Whatever permanent zoomies the Waynes claimed he had were gone, and after only a few hours of sneaky research, Tim flagged, slumped, then passed out at the Batcomputer.

He stirred sometime in the early AMs when someone lifted him out of the Batchair. Tim weakly hissed and headbutted them. He hadn't consented to be moved.

A tired, fond sigh was followed by a large hand ruffling Tim's hair as whoever it was tucked him against the hollow of their shoulder.

"G' away," Tim grumbled. "Busy."

"I can tell," they said dryly, voice deep and soothing. "Extremely busy."

Tim settled, mollified since they knew he was doing important dragon things. The hand kept ruffling his hair. Footsteps echoed off large walls. Tim heard a door creak open as the sound of bats faded.

He was asleep before they made it past the fake clock upstairs.

***

Two hours later, Tim was woken by a loud bang. He sat up, hair a fluffy halo as he stared blearily at Dick, who'd kicked open the bedroom door.

"What're you *doing?"* Tim demanded, blinking away a strangely realistic dream of Bruce tucking him in like a pathetic human child.

"Oh, thank god," Dick said, slumping against the door frame. "You're here."

Tim, slightly more awake, squinted at his bendy human. It was dark, but dragons had excellent night vision. Dick looked spooked.

"What's wrong?" Tim asked, untangling himself from his blankets.

"It's your mom," Dick said. "She's missing."

***

Tim liked to think he was strong, but whenever something happened to his parents he instantly felt helpless. He almost broke his transformation strike so he could scour the Eastern seaboard for her, but Bruce made him take a seat and let Babs search for dragon sightings on the Internet first.

"Call your father," Bruce said, "make sure he's alright."

Tim did with shaking fingers. Jack had been the one to ping the Waynes that Janet wasn't in the clinic. He was ready to stage an escape, but it was difficult since he was wheelchair bound and would have to steal someone's car keys. For better or worse, he had to rely on Tim and the Bats to locate his wife.

"I don't understand why she'd leave," Jack said. "There's no sign of a struggle, but what if she was kidnapped? Or hurt? She never leaves me if she can help it."

"I'm sure she had her reasons," Tim said, failing to sound soothing. The contents of Janet's letter sat heavy in his stomach. Janet had a lot of possible reasons for being AWOL right now. "Don't worry, Dad, we'll find her."

They had to. If Janet was hurt . . . Tim swallowed bile.

As it turned out, there was no need to comb the earth for his mom. Around dawn, Jason stormed into the Batcave.

"What the hell happened to the manor while I was gone?" he demanded.

Tim, Dick, Bruce, and Alfred looked up from the computers they were manning, still elbow-deep in searching for Janet.

"Whatever do you mean, master Jason?" Alfred asked.

"I mean the fucking war zone outside," Jason said. "Pardon my French."

"War zone?" Tim echoed.

Bruce was already pulling up the security cameras. None of the sensors had been tripped, so there hadn't been any alerts.

Showcased in black and white was the feed for the Batcave's emergency exit; the camera itself had been destroyed several hours ago, its wires cut and disarmed in a way that'd silenced the alerts. Dozens of claw marks were gouged into the stones, and the ground was scorched.

The hair on Tim's arms rose as Bruce paused the footage before everything had gone black. Captured on film, barely more than a blur of monochrome, were two colorless eyes glowing in the corner of the frame, and the glint of her bared teeth.

"My word," Alfred said. "Is that your mother?"

"Yeah," Tim said, fidgeting. "I guess something made her mad."

"No kidding," Jason said, "but why come here? We're the last people she'd want to maul."

"I don't . . ." Tim began. "Is she still out there?"

"Unclear," Bruce said seriously, tapping his fingers against the desktop. "She didn't trip any of our sensors. This behavior is unlike her."

Tim made a distressed sound of agreement. Janet normally only attacked him when he was close by, but they hadn't been in close proximity since last summer. There was no reason for this.

He paused, remembering proudly handing a care package to a courier to deliver to Bludhaven earlier that day. It'd been Janet's new prosthetic. The one Tim had made. The one that smelled like him because he'd forgotten to soak it in bleach.

"Oops," Tim whispered. "I think this is my fault."

The Waynes slowly turned to stare at him.

"I may have, um," he mumbled, "done a thing."

His and Janet's scent tolerance for one another was at an all-time low. It was instant-death-killswitch if they got a whiff of dragon. They'd planned around that for the letter exchange, but in Tim's excitement to give him mom a present he'd forgotten to do the same.

"Really?" Alfred said, dry as an Arctic winter. "Pray tell."

Tim slid down his chair, wishing he were still unconscious. Stupid homicidal instincts. He and Janet could never catch a break.

***

Come dawn, nobody had died, but Tim almost wished he had. The Waynes were *not* impressed he'd accidentally triggered Janet's murderous instincts via package scent-bomb. The way they put it, it'd endangered his entire family and the people in the clinic. They were lucky Janet hadn't harmed anyone.

Instead, she'd destroyed several of Tim's bone shrines, then went to the Batcave to hunt him down and rip him apart limb from limb. Luckily, she'd been able to rein in her instincts before she reached Tim, but everyone was spooked by the incident. Mostly because Janet had been lurking ten feet away from the Batcave's entrance for over an hour, and none of Babs' cameras, Bruce's motion detectors, or Tim's senses had noticed her. If Janet hadn't come back to her senses, Tim wouldn't have made it past the front door that morning.

It was a wake-up call for the humans, apparently, to remember just how stealthy Janet was. There was nothing so alarming as the thought of a sixty-foot long dragon casing someone's house for a potential meal . . . Except, perhaps, that the only reason said dragon hadn't broken in and murdered everyone was because she didn't want to make her husband upset.

It was an embarrassing situation for both Tim and Janet. In a perfect world, they'd bury it six feet under and pretend it'd never happened, but their humans *insisted* on making a big deal out of it. Bruce had spent the entire morning muttering about getting J'onn to do another mental evaluation of Janet, and Dick had called in sick at the precinct to mother-hen Tim like a deranged octopus.

They insisted they weren't angry, but the cuddling was endless, as were the lectures on *communicating* about things like missing his parents. Babs even lectured him, saying that he

secrecy had been unnecessary, and that she or any of the Waynes would've been happy to bring Janet her present.. Tim, acutely aware of the other secret he was hiding from them, was at his wit's end. Frankly, he wanted to forget the entire incident and pretend it hadn't happened, but nobody was on his side.

Not even his parents.

"You're leaving?" Tim said three days after the incident, aghast. "You can't do that!"

Tim had called Jack for their morning talk, expecting more lectures, but this was worse. Way worse.

"I'm sorry, son, but it's already set in stone," Jack said. "By that I mean your mother insists, and I have to say yes."

That was rare. Jack was almost impossible to talk into doing things he didn't want to. Janet must have done something crazy—like cry—if he was deferring to her.

"Mom," Tim said, turning to where Janet was sitting by the window in Jack's hospital room, "tell Dad you changed your mind. You have to stay here."

Janet was too busy inspecting her new prosthetic to reply. Now that Tim's scent had worn off, she wouldn't put it down. She flexed her new titanium fingers, purring in delight at how the metal caught in the light.

"Mom!" Tim said louder. "Mom, back me up!"

She purred as she inspected it from another angle, completely ignoring Tim.

He hissed in annoyance. It figured one of the rare times he got her to make happy dragon noises was when she was tuning him out.

“Buck up, kiddo, it’ll be fine,” Jack said. “We’ll still call every day, and a bit of distance could do us all some good. Janet wants to make sure you’re alright, that’s why she’s insisting.”

Betrayal, that’s what this was. It felt like only yesterday that Jack had been the one trying to get the family back together while *Tim* insisted it was safer if they stayed apart. How the tables had turned.

“You’re just saying that because you don’t trust us. I beat Mom once, I could do it again,” Tim said, even though fighting his mom was the last thing he ever wanted to do. “She doesn’t scare me.”

He tactfully didn’t mention that if Janet had the element of surprise, he’d be dead before he hit the ground.

“I’m sure you’d do great,” Jack said, “but just in case, we’re not going to risk it. We’ll put some healthy distance between us, I’ll learn to walk again—there’s a renowned physical therapist in Paris I’ll be seeing—and Janet won’t need to be as hyper-vigilant about her instincts. Everybody wins.”

Tim bit the inside of his cheek. If everybody won, then why did it feel like he was losing?

“I didn’t mean to cause any problems,” he said. “I just wanted to do something nice.”

“Trust me, I know,” Jack said. “Your mother is *very* pleased with her gift. I’m never going to get it away from her.”

Janet chirped in delight as she flexed her fingers, causing claws to sprout from under the nails of her new digits. Tim had included an extra set with hollow points she could put poison in, so she could be extra lethal if she wanted.

Jack sighed, looking even more tired. “I do hope those don’t get her into trouble at board meetings.”

That made Tim pause. “At the what?”

“I’m helping Janet find a new hobby,” Jack said. “She’ll be channeling her aggressiveness in productive ways from now on, and hopefully avoid lapses in control.”

That cleared up nothing. Was he going to let her join an underground cage-fighting club or something? What did “productive aggressiveness” mean?

“That is to say, I’m making her CEO of Drake Industries for a while,” Jack said.

Oh. Okay. What?

“*Mom?”* Tim said, just to be sure he hadn’t misheard. He still wasn’t ruling out the Chad incident as a hallucination. This could be another one. “But she’s a professional house dragon. Look at her!”

He gestured at his mother, emphasizing how happy she was in her natural habitat (near Jack and away from responsibilities). Sure, Janet was amazing at business—she’d taught Tim everything she knew—but her true passion lay in doing 10,000-piece puzzles and lounging around the living room. Why throw that all away?

“I’m not in condition to manage an international company right now,” Jack said, looking disheartened. “And from what I’ve noticed, someone was manipulating the shares during my coma, which means the board is up to something again. Rooting them out should amuse your mother for a few weeks. I think it’ll be a good way for her to burn off her aggression without *actually* burning anything.”

“That does sound kind of interesting,” Tim said. Making cutthroat business deals was the only fun part of capitalism. “Does she get to eat the people she doesn’t like?”

Jack gave him a look.

“It was just a question,” Tim said, a little petulantly. It never hurt to ask.

“My answer to the two of you eating my board members will always be no,” Jack said. “Anyway, we’ll be in Paris for six or seven months. Hopefully, that’ll be far enough away for you both to

recover. Once you've both calmed down, we'll talk about a reunion. Sound good?"

"Peachy," Tim said, queasy with hope and anxiety. "Love you, Dad."

"Love you too. We'll talk some more tomorrow," Jack said. "Janet, say goodbye to—*Jan,* do not stab that!"

The call disconnected, screen frozen to show Jack (still bed-bound) trying to lunge at Janet while she attempted to pray the casing off a medical monitor.

Tim frowned at the image, then texted his mom a hundred frowny face emojis to express his ire. Six or seven months away. That was basically forever.

Why did things have to keep getting worse?

***

Two days after Jack and Janet left, Tim got spammed with text messages from Bart asking when their next hang-out would be. The Titans (née Young Justice) hadn't gotten together in person since before the new year, and the resident speedster was dying from boredom.

Maybe later, Tim replied, typing with one hand so he could continue scrolling through his cold case on the Batcomputer. *Busy.*

He threw his phone aside and sighed. That was a bad response and he knew it, but between his Super Important Research for Janet, looking after the Waynes, and dealing with his *emotions,* being around lots of people . . . sounded awful. Tim's battery was so low these days, he probably wouldn't be fun to be around anyway.

He picked up his phone again, then added *soon. I promise.*

He'd give Bart a bone-breaking hug soon, just not today.

Tim's attention turned back to the Ferdinand case. He'd been poking on it all week, and he thought he might finally be almost close to a breakthrough. That could be the sleep deprivation talking though. He'd been too irritated at his parents' absence to get proper rest.

A loud bang was his only warning before the entrance to the cave was slammed open.

"Today is the day!" Steph said, spreading her arms from atop the stairs.

"Huh?" Tim craned his neck as she dashed down the stairs, skipping every other step.

Steph pulled him out of the Batchair, swatting his hands away from the keyboard. "It's *March,* and you're still not back on the streets. You barely even leave the cave. I know you're not a subterranean dragon, so this has to stop. *Today.*"

"My kind love caves," Tim defended. "And lakes, and rivers, and mountains, and—"

They could live basically anywhere, so long as there was room to move their wings. Although, Tim would give the desert a hard pass. There wasn't enough moisture there, and Yinlongs thrived on hiding in large bodies of water. Not having giant puddles to lurk in was a quality of life issue.

"At this point, you're more bat than lizard," Steph said, picking a piece of lint off his shirt. "Is that Cass' blouse?"

"It's *our* blouse," Tim said, crossing his arms to protect the Animal Crossing shirt he'd stolen from the attic. "If Cass wants it back, she can come home and claim it."

He'd also claimed her room as a second residence. Cass would have to bodily haul him out of the attic if she ever wanted privacy again. Served her right for being gone this long.

"Fair enough," Steph said. "My point is, you need to get out and about. You're basically a shut in."

Tim tried to cross his arms, then realized they were already folded. “Am not.”

“Maybe Tim Drake isn’t,” Steph said. “But your vigilante life is sorely lacking. We need to get you back on the field.”

He paused, witty retort poised on his tongue. “What?”

He hadn’t thought of Robin since Bruce benched him after Haiti. There had been too many violent incidents, and Tim still hadn’t gotten clearance from Babs to be left unsupervised on the streets. The Bats were correctly worried that Tim would snap and bite someone’s head off. Janet wasn’t the only one struggling with her instincts right now.

“The goody-two shoes act stops now,” Steph said. She pulled him toward the lockers. “I need my partner in crime.”

“But—” Tim looked around for Bruce. “Don’t you have patrol?”

Steph’s grip tightened. “Bruce can patrol on his own. I’m not dealing with his crap today. I don’t know how you can work with him. He’s an unemotional rock and a complete task master—don’t smile, these are *bad* things, Tim.”

“Agree to disagree,” Tim said. “I think they’re charm points.”

Bruce was and always would be a delightfully perfect human. Tim was proud to have called dibs on him before any other dragons realized how awesome he was.

“Weirdo.” Steph pulled a spare Robin costume out of the locker and threw it at Tim. “Put this one. It’s time we ride again.”

The fabric was smooth and cold. It smelled like Alfred’s laundry detergent, and had been repaired in the shoulders several times. Tim pressed it against his face, soaking in the scent, and felt his hesitation melt away.

“I guess if you need company,” he said. “Wouldn’t want you to patrol alone.”

Steph beamed. “That’s what I’m talking about. We’re going to have *fun* tonight.”

She and Tim were out of the cave before Alfred was down with their evening tea.

***

In the city proper, silhouetted under pale yellow streetlights and smog, two Robins swung across rooftops and skyscrapers. Tim let his grapple line go carry him over streets and alleys, relishing the smell of his home. It’d been too long since he’d flown; even without his real wings, it was freeing.

“Where are we going?” Tim asked after twenty minutes. “Are you working any cases?”

“Kind of,” Steph said, perching on a gargoyle. “I’m looking for dirt on Black Mask, but that can wait. Tonight is our reunion tour.”

Her hair was straw-gold and wild. The red on her uniform the color of summer cherries. Steph should have looked strange without her normal purple, but it was like the Robin uniform was made for her.

“What happens on vigilante reunion tours?” Tim asked, bemused. “We’re not a rock band.”

She sighed dramatically. “If only. Too bad you’re as musical as a dying possum.”

Tim shrugged, unable to defend himself. Dragons were many things, but musical they were not. Tim’s attempts to sing tended to break windows, and he couldn’t hold a tune to save his life.

“We’re going to get up to dastardly deeds and diabolical danger,” Steph said, her mask lenses’ contracting in delight. “Come, scaly boy, a feast of fear awaits!”

She leapt off the gargoyle with a cackle, causing Tim to bark a laugh in surprise.

“You didn’t tell me anything, Spoy!” He called, leaping into the air as well. “What’s our first stop?”

She did a slip as she sling-shotted herself around a street corner.

“Where we always go when we want to annoy someone,” she said. “Keep up!”

***

In the weeks Tim had been under self-imposed house arrest, Crime Alley hadn’t changed. The streets were dirty, the people hard-nosed, and the public infrastructure nonexistent. By that, Tim meant that it wasn’t public at all, especially not book-related places. Crime oozed into every pore of the area, much like termites weaseled into wood. These terminates liked literature.

“Oh God, no,” one the Red Hood goons said, staring up in terror. “Hell no! Boss, you said the freaky one was gone!”

Tim and Steph made matching cackles from the rafters of Jason’s abandoned library base.

Jason put a hand against his helmet and sighed. Tim waved cheerily; it’d been too long since he’d visited his zombie on patrol. Using this as an excuse to practice stealth was just a bonus.

“Vacation,” Jason said. “I said he was on *vacation.* But it was supposed to be a *longer* vacation than this. Kid, does the Bat know you’re here?”

Tim opened his mouth to answer.

“Lay off,” Steph told Jason, before Tim could get a word in. “He does what he wants. Stop trying to hold him back. Authority is for sheeple. Robin-3 *eats* sheeple.”

“He does *not,”* Jason said while several of his men crossed themselves. “I’ve made it clear my men are off-limits, go eat a cat if you’re hungry.”

“He does what he wants!” Steph yelled. “Justice for the sapien-diet!”

Tim didn’t have the time (nor interest) in reminding Steph that she was normally against him munching on people. Robin-the-sequel had come here to cause trouble, and trouble she was causing.

“Viva chaos!” she said, pulling a set of Spoilerfied smoke bombs out of her utility belt.

The room exploded into a cloud of glitter dust. Hood’s men coughed into their hands, keeping their firearms hidden since A) it was too-close quarters to risk shooting each other, and B) Jason tended to shoot people who shot at Robin.

Tim and Steph gleefully jumped out of the rafters and darted for the door, faces covered in do-rags and masks.

“Girl Robin, why?” one of the goons said. “You were the chosen one! You were meant to be our savior!”

Steph just cackled, and Tim had to dampen a purr. It’d been a while since he’d heard her laugh so freely. Teaming up had been a good idea. They needed to do it more often.

“Did you seriously come here just to *annoy me?”* Jason growled, chasing after them. His mask made the glitter-bomb was useless against him. “If so, congrats, because I’m *pissed!”*

“Robin-3, attack mode!” Steph yelled. “We’ll rendezvous in Valhalla!”

Not needing to be told twice, Tim body-slammed Jason onto the floor and grinned as he put him in a pin. Steph vanished out of the room, probably to cause trouble in the rest of the base.

“You’re the worst,” Jason said, not trying too hard to shake Tim off. “One day your cuteness factor will disappear and I’ll laugh. *Laugh!* Little-brother status will only get you so far. I have a drug deal tonight, I need to look professional.”

“Don’t worry,” Tim said, shifting into more of his dragon weight so Jason couldn’t buck him off. “I hear sparkles are the new black. You’ll be the envy of the other crime lords.”

“You little—I’m going to hide all your coffee!”

Tim giggled. Even Alfred was struggling to find all of Tim’s caches. Jason was too busy (and too much of a pushover) to follow through on that threat.

“You’re just mad I got into your base *again,”* Tim said. “You need better security.”

“Boss!” One of the thugs yelled in the distance. “Boss, where did you go? Don’t leave us, I don’t want to be one of the little Rob’s victims!”

There was a loud thunk, like two meat heads had collided at high speeds. Jason seemed to like hoarding morons in his organization.

“My security is fine,” Jason hissed at Tim, ignoring his goons’ panic. “You’re just good at weaseling your way into places because you were trained by the world’s most annoying infiltrator.”

Tim paused. “Are you talking about Bruce or Dick?”

“Yes,” Jason said, “now get off me, and I’ll choke you out for being a brat.”

“I think you mean or,” Tim said dryly. “No thanks, I’m not into that.”

He jumped off Jason and flung himself back into the rafters, then found the skylight that Jason *still* hadn't boarded up, and escaped into the city once more.

As he slipped the window closed, Tim heard the chaos die down as Jason took charge, berating his men for being "useless in the face of teen terrors" again.

"But boss," one of the goons said. "We're not allowed to hurt minors. That's literally one of your rules—"

Tim left them to their fate (being yelled at by Jason) and went to find Steph. Honestly, if Hood wanted to keep out the Bats, he probably could. Tim suspected Jason actually liked the surprised visits, or at least used them as awareness training for his men, otherwise he would've left the library ages ago.

Half an hour later, he caught up with Steph on top of an old, grimy bank. Two halves of a whole Robin, united once more.

"Get anything good?" he asked, peeking over her shoulders.

She stuffed several crumpled papers into her shirt. "Yup, step one of my evil plan is complete."

"Plan?" Tim said, "I thought we were just pranking them."

Steph was the master of unorganized violence. Even though she could scheme like the best of them, she preferred to be more spontaneous.

"We were," Steph said. "But Jason also has tons of info on the local gangs. It never hurts to brush up on it."

Well, that was true. But she could've just asked him about it. Jason was usually willing to share information with Tim. The only times he got stingy with it were when he thought the investigation was too "dark" or "risky" for Robin to be involved with.

“What were you looking for?” Tim asked, tugging on a piece of Steph’s hair.

“Nothing much,” she said. “Just a way for Bruce to take me seriously. I swear, it’s like he thinks I’m still in diapers. It’s high time he realizes I’m a help, not a hindrance.”

“Cool,” Tim said. “Fill me in? I’m a good assistant.”

Steph leaned against the roof railing, hair a staticky frizz haloing her face. “Nah, I’m good. It wouldn’t count if I had help. This is between me and him.”

She looked over the city, gaze calculating. Tim stood beside her, following her gaze. Was there a cold-case she wanted to solve? Bruce would be seriously impressed by that, though Tim didn’t see why Steph wanted to make him proud. She didn’t care what anybody thought. At least, that’s what Tim had assumed.

“As long as you’re sure you’re okay,” Tim said. “But I’m right here if you need me.”

Steph’s smile was shark teeth and spite. “Trust me Tim, I’ll be fine. I have everything under control.”

On the horizon, Black Mask’s skyscraper stood tall and straight, like a knife.

Chapter End Notes

Janet, 0.2 seconds away from divebombing Wayne manor to rip Tim's throat out: Wait no, husband would cry. Abort mission!
Tim, who probably would've let her murder him because he doesn't want to hurt his mom again: Coward!
Jack: *sigh* at least in my coma I got enough sleep and plenty of rest. Those were the days.

Meanwhile, in the middle of a magic ritual deep in the jungle:

Shiva: For the love off--Let me kill the leader already!
Cass: No, killing bad! Knock out only.
Shiva: Permanent knockout.
Cass: Stop sound like Tim!
Shiva: Who the hell is Tim?! Whatever, we don't have time for--
Boom. Spirit gate opens
Cass: :0
Shiva: :0
Leader: At long last, the gateway has opened, the world shall be reordered in my image with the aid of the spirits. You were too slow, fools, too wrapped up in your own petty drama to stop me, the great--
WHAM
--
--
--

Cultist 1: Did you just see--?
Cultist 2: Both of those terrifying assassins bodyslam our fearless leader into the active pentagram and vanish into spheres of light? Yes, yes I did.
Cultist 1: ... Does this mean the ritual failed?
Cultist 2: I mean, probably not--wait, no, the temple is collapsing, shit! Yes, yes it failed, dangit. We were only supposed to use one dead human sacrifice, not three live ones. We're doomed!
Cultist 1: Everybody RUN!

(Meanwhile, falling through space and time, Cass, Shiva, and the cult leader are making identical Surprised Pikachu faces. Whoops)

Everything Is Fine (5)

Chapter Summary

Steph: Can't we do something fun for once?
Bruce: No. Boring patrols will continue until morale improves.
Steph: *screams*

Tim: is that a happy sound? :D

Meanwhile, Dick and Babs continue to scheme, Janet has a fun day in the office, and Tim is fine. Really.

Chapter Notes

Ya'll are going to hate me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morale between Batman and Robin 4.0 did not improve. This was especially apparent when Steph stomped into the Batcave on Friday, dripping wet and filthy.

Tim spun in his swivel chair, distracted from the case he'd been working on all evening by the smell. "Why are you back so early?"

Bruce was nowhere to be seen, which meant she'd probably ditched their patrol route, but why? Steph loved punching petty crooks in the teeth.

"I *hate* Batman," Steph seethed, chucking her soiled Robin cape onto the floor. "He made me patrol the sewers. *Again."*

"B's looking for Scarecrow," Tim said, breathing through his mouth. Enhanced senses and sewage were *not* a good combination. Usually, he didn't mind, but something about these scents being in the Batcave was *wrong.* "It makes sense to check there. Rogues like smuggling barrels of chemicals through them."

“Not the point, Tim,” Steph said, flinging off her boots. The smell somehow got worse. “Scarecrow’s been out *forever* and we still haven’t heard a peep out of him. This is busy work and you know it.”

Tim squeezed his Emotional Support Crocky and shrugged. It squeaked and made a cutesy sound effect. He’d been holding it all night, pretending it was a mini-Janet.

“Black Mask is out there buying truckloads of guns from the Russians, and Bruce wants me on sewer duty.” Steph said as she stomped to the showers. “I’m *wasted* in this temp job.”

“You literally volunteered for it,” Tim called after her.

“Because I thought it’d be good!” she yelled back. “Your boss *sucks,* Tim.”

A second later, Steph squawked as cold water blasted her. Tim winced; he probably should have mentioned the cave’s water heater broke yesterday.

***

“Steph says you suck,” Tim said at breakfast the next morning.

Bruce grunted but didn’t look up from his newspaper. The financial section must have been interesting. Either that, or Steph’s opinion of him was such old news that it didn’t register anymore.

“You should let me patrol with you again,” Tim continued. “We have lots of fun.”

“You’re still grounded for sneaking out with Steph last week,” Bruce said, flipping to a new page. “Nice try.”

“That was forever ago,” Tim said, poking his fried eggs and grits. “You can’t hold me accountable for it. Statue of limitations has passed.”

“It was three days ago.”

Tim blew his hair out of his face. “Exactly.”

The look Bruce gave him was all kinds of dry, but Tim stood by what he’d said. He’d needed enrichment and Steph had needed a buddy. Ergo, sneaking into the city had been an act of noble charity. Jason ratting him out to Bruce because he’d “psychologically scarred” more Red Hood gangsters was just bad form.

“Stick to comms, I’ll see if we can get you back out there eventually,” Bruce said. “But we’re taking it slow for a reason, champ. You know that.”

This again. Tim smothered the urge to bristle and instead glared at his plate. “I’m *fine.”*

He hadn’t tried to maim anyone in days, his hoard needed to let this go.

“I know,” Bruce said softly. “You’re doing wonderfully, Tim. Just be patient a little longer. There’s no shame in taking time to rest.”

The sun peeked through the window, casting the antique table in a honey-warm glow. Outside, frost and snow still covered everything. March was a harsh, mercurial month that could never decide which season it was. Some days, warmth and growth peaked their heads out of the snow. Others, it was as dreary and miserable as the darkest days of January.

Tim stabbed his eggs and watched the yolk bleed across the plate. “Yeah, says you.”

Outside, the sun danced on the snow, beautiful and brilliant, but cold.

***

Fortune came a few days later, and by fortune Tim meant freedom to dress in form-fitting spandex Kevlar weave once more. Babs had needed help installing new cameras in several areas of Gotham, and the Bats had deemed it a “safe” enough mission for Tim.

Safe, please. Tim didn’t need protecting. The kiddy gloves were demeaning.

“It’s not to protect you,” Babs said as she triple-checked the duffel of gear he’d be hauling around the city. “There are rumors the Robin Support Group in Arkham is going to split into two sections, and Hood’s gang will bankrupt him for worker’s comp at this rate. Your job tonight is to not interact with anyone for the sake of their fragile mental health.”

Tim gave her a big frown and even bigger judgment.

“You can’t trick me with random rumors about a made up club,” he said. “Robin doesn’t need support, and Jason’s goons are fine. I’m very nice to them, they’re fun to play with.”

Chasing them reminded him of playing with the mice in Drake Manor when he was a kid. When he got bored, it’d been fun to bat them around like tiny ping-pong balls. They made funny squeaks.

“Play nicer,” Babs said, zipping the bag shut. “Those are some of the only semi-decent goons in Gotham. I’d hate to replace them.”

That would be a shame. Good thing Tim didn’t care. This felt suspiciously like a lecture, and he didn’t have time for those. Tonight wasn’t about that.

“Where did you want me to put these?” Tim asked, hauling the duffel onto his shoulder. It bulged with wires and various tools.

“Otisburg and the Narrows,” Babs said, turning back to the computer. “Black Mask has been active down there, and whoever he’s hired has a knack for spotting my surveillance. What hasn’t been broken or stolen is vandalized and spray-painted blind. Normally, I’d ask Steph to handle this for me, but—”

“But Steph is busy with B,” Tim finished for her. “I get it.”

Tonight, she and Bruce were looking into several gangs. They’d said something about a laundering scheme? Tim hadn’t been listening. He’d been too busy grinning at how Steph was grinding her teeth and Bruce was actively praying for patience. He got a fuzzy feeling seeing them so worked up. Sue him, those were healthy, dragon emotions and he loved seeing them on other people.

“Thanks for being a good sport,” Babs said. “I’d give you a hair ruffle if you weren’t so far away.”

Tim took a subtle step closer so Babs could get her enrichment.

“And you say you’re not a fan of physical contact,” she said, tucking his hair behind his ear when she finished. “Faker.”

“Excuse me, I’m being generous,” Tim said, “you have literally no idea how much. Dragons don’t put up with this from just anybody.”

“Uh huh,” she said, not bothering to hide her amusement. It danced in her eyes and reflected off her glasses like little fireflies. “Of course not. You’re noble creatures.”

“Very noble,” Tim said. “Don’t you forget it.”

His hoard had been treating him with kiddie gloves all year. You have a couple breakdowns and suddenly you’re made of glass. Tim needed to remind them, once again, that he was fine.

“I’ll be sure to keep it in mind,” Babs said. She nudged him forward. “Now get, I need to see what’s going on in crime central.”

Tim scuttled out the skylight, leaving her to do her coding thing, as usual.

The last glimpse of Babs he got was her hunched over her computer, grinning as she started blackmailing a senator. On the corner of her screen, a blue sticky note was scribbled on in Sharpie.

Call Dick. Next phase, tomorrow.

Tim eyed The Wall of Romance schemes and shuddered. That was one scheme he wanted no part of.

***

Tim found out what the "next phase" was the next day. The reveal took the shape of Dick Grayson skipping into the Batcave to reel Tim into a hug to end all hugs.

"You're going to break my ribs," Tim wheezed.

After years of living with the Waynes, Tim had gained partial immunity to Dick's embraces, but that didn't save him today. It was like being choked by a magnetic force, and escape was impossible. Dick had finally reached his final form as an octopus of huggable doom, and Tim was just one of many victims to be sacrificed to him.

"No I'm not, you're just dramatic," Dick said, but set Tim down.

"Why are you so happy?" Tim asked, automatically suspicious.

"Hmm?" Dick said cheerfully. "I'm not happy."

Tim gave him the stink-eye. People called Tim situationally unaware, but he wasn't *blind.*

"Well, let's just say Babs and I are officially 'on a break,'" Dick said, steepling his fingers. "We coordinated it so we had a huge fight on Valentine's Day a few weeks ago, then staged a bunch of awkward dates where our relationship gradually disintegrated. Today, Babs finally told me I need to 'grow up' and find someone else."

Tim nodded slowly. Dick was probably the only person in the universe who'd sound so happy to be dumped. Fake dumped? This was still fake, right? Tim's exasperation sure wasn't.

"Gordon is walking on clouds," Dick said, bouncing on his heels. "He thinks he's won. But he *hasn't*, Tim. This is only the beginning."

"It's been 'the beginning' for over a year now," Tim said. "Don't you think you've gotten your message across?"

Frankly, Tim didn't even remember *why* Dick and Babs had decided fake dating was the hill they wanted to die on. It had something to do with Gordon annoying them, but this went beyond petty.

"It's not about the message anymore," Dick said, looking at the Batcave's stalactites dreamily. "It's about committing to the bit. And boy oh boy, am I committed."

"At this rate, you'll *be* committed," Tim said, "to an asylum for love-struck loons."

Too many hours of reality TV shows had melted Dick's brain. Hopefully, the idiocy wasn't catching. Tim *liked* his intelligence.

Dick rolled his eyes. "Mock me all you want. You're just jealous you don't have a long con charade to pull over someone."

"I already did that," Tim said. "Remember Young Justice?"

Dick paused. "Huh, oh yeah."

It was Tim's turn to roll his eyes. Trust Dick to forget about that entire incident—along with the first fourteen years of Tim's life—where he'd successfully tricked everyone into thinking he was "normal."

“Well, no biggie,” Dick said. “I’m not here to argue with you. My adorable future ring bearer, I have a proposition for you. Do you want to help me annoy the commissioner by—”

Dick’s no doubt intriguing pass time was drowned out by the batmobile returning to the cave and screeching to a stop. Steph slammed the passenger door shut behind her as Batman got out from behind the wheel, looking furious.

“We are *not* done with this, young lady,” he said. “Get back here.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, you are *not* my dad!” she screeched, and flung a half empty soda can at him before stomping to the lockers.

“Robin, get back here!” Bruce snapped. “Your behavior tonight was unacceptable!”

Steph gave him the finger and vanished around the bend.

Dick and Tim stood awkwardly by the computer. Dick was wincing in sympathy while Tim was looking delightedly between Steph and Bruce. They were angry again. That was a good emotion! Except, maybe not when they were mad at each other. Maybe he could help them redirect their wrath at some rogues? That’d fix things.

“Bruce, do you want to fight something?” Tim said, running over. “We should do that, it’s fun. You should channel your natural aggression, that’s what Mom always tells me. Come on, there’s a drug den in Tricorner we can—”

“I’m not channeling anything, Tim,” Bruce said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I am trying to calm down.”

“But—” Tim began.

Bruce pulled his cowl off. “I have damage control to do because Steph revealed herself to one of Black Mask’s lieutenants, another lead to follow to find Cass, and a meeting to prepare for at WE

tomorrow. If you want hoard time, track down Steph. I think she'd enjoy ranting to you for a while."

He patted Tim's shoulder and staggered to the Batcomputer, muttering about stubborn teenagers while Dick looked on with a bone-dry expression.

Well, fine. If Tim's talents were better appreciated elsewhere, then elsewhere he would be. Bada boom bada bing, everyone was happy.

"Steph, wait for me," he yelled. "Don't calm down yet, please! I need to see you unleashed!"

He bolted for the exit.

"You know, that was an asshole move" Dick said wryly to Bruce as Tim threw himself up the stairs, "Don't take out your grumpiness on Tim when he's just trying to help."

Bruce grunted an apologetic noise, then started tapping on the keyboard. Dick sighed loudly, and continued his lecture.

Tim was even less interested in listening to Bruce' lecture than he'd been with his own, so it was easily ignored. He made it up the final step, wriggled out the clock, and licked the air to catch Steph's scent.

A few minutes later, he found her in one of the gyms, knocking the stuffing out of one of the bags. Her face was red as a tomato, and her arms were pistons of steel while her hair clung to her shoulders in a sweaty mess.

"Spoy!" Tim said in delight. "Want to complain about Bruce again?"

She wiped her face. "Hell yeah. You won't believe this, Tim. He's such a—"

Tim settled on the mats and happily listened to her rant.

***

So, long story short, Bruce was probably kind of in the right. Steph had given him the slip and gone somewhere without backup, and if he hadn't been there she would've been in hot water. That was bad. Steph wasn't Tim; sure, she was capable and amazing and was armed with many a brick, but she was still human. Still squishy and easily hurt. Still too precious to ever be in danger. So, Tim was also kind of sort of on Bruce's side. The safer Steph was, the better.

"You were supposed to be my ally," Steph said. "Traitor!"

Tim sprawled over her lap, unbothered. He'd gotten her to stop abusing the punching bag about twenty minutes ago. "Humans are herd animals. Safety in numbers. I'm literally telling you to follow your instincts."

"How about you follow your instincts," Steph grumbled.

He cracked an eye open at her. Tim didn't want to touch his instincts with a ten-foot pole at the moment. They were why people he loved got hurt.

Steph started tugging his hair into separate bunches. "I can't wait until you're back in action so I don't have to put up with Mr. Broody. It'll be any day, right? Gosh, your hair is long."

She started to braid the strands, which wouldn't work because Tim's hair only went to the bottom of his ears, but it felt nice so he let her keep going.

"Babs is going to let me help install more cameras," Tim said, blinking heavily. "Then do more surveillance. Stalk people."

"Your favorite hobby," Steph said.

"Mm," Tim said.

“Has Bruce told you about the lead on Cass yet?” Steph asked. “She was looking into some cult or whatever. He thinks magic is involved and she got teleported somewhere, but those idiots at the JLA are all either in different dimensions or actively useless, so we’re not sure. What’s the point of having a world-wide superhero club if nobody’s there to help out? This is why I’m a lone wolf.”

“Useless NPCs,” Tim agreed. “Not worth hoarding.”

They didn’t even have caves in their bases. Boring.

“Yeah,” Steph said. “You get me.”

“Mm,” Tim said again.

She poked his ribs. “Come on, don’t fall asleep. I’m done ranting, now it’s time to gossip.”

“Nope,” Tim said. “Rant more.”

He liked it when people were mad. It was comforting. The main reason Jack and Janet fought was because they disagreed on the best ways to look after him. They expressed their love with wild gestures and arguments about morality versus murder. Whenever Tim’s own hoard lost their tempers, he liked to think it was for the same reasons. Steph could stuff her gossip; he wanted to hear why she cared so much about something that she snapped.

“I swear, you’re the only person I’ve met who *likes* it when people are irritated,” Steph said, finishing off a tiny, skinny braid near his temple. “You’re almost as weird as B.”

Tim smiled, taking the compliment for what it was.

***

He wasn't smiling two days later when a loud ding woke him up at four A.M on a school night.

Tim had learned a lot since Haiti. One of the most important lessons was to always be prepared. Never again would he be caught off guard by anything, especially not his parents. Which was why he now had alerts on his phone that'd update him if Jack or Janet were mentioned in any newspapers, blogs, or networks. It was a foolproof way to stay updated on their lives while they were gone.

Currently, he hated himself for creating this system. He glared at his phone screen, bleary-eyed and grumpy. Janet's deadpan, smug face stared back, taking up the entire front page of a digital news article. He'd been pulled back to consciousness and it wasn't even an emergency. He'd have to update his notification settings.

His eyes snagged on the headline. Okay, maybe the update could wait. This actually looked important.

Tim sat up, shaking his shaggy hair out of his eyes, and frowned at the screen. Eyes once bleary began to untangle the words.

CEO FIGHTS ARMED GUNMAN

During a shareholder's meeting in Montreal on March 10th, an armed gunman broke into DI's headquarters and took the board hostage. Negotiations with the police had hardy begun before temporary CEO, Janet Drake, exited the building and threw the unconscious gunman down the stairs in a bloody heap. Shareholders refuse to comment on the altercation between her and the gunman. However, paramedics have revealed that she bit off his ear. This incident, paired with the accusation of murder pointed toward Janet Drake last year, seems to signal that Drake Industries had found a truly cutthroat CEO. However, concerns arise when considering the brutality of her response to the situation. While justified, it . . .

The article went on for a while, mostly to complain about how hard it was to find information on Janet. She usually only appeared in photos next to Jack, and since she'd never had a job until now there was no paper trail to follow. Aside from her passport, the only official records of her were (forged) legal documents Jack had gotten her to finalize her green card back in the 90's, and her wedding certificate. The journalism industry was starving for any tidbits about her.

Tim scrolled to the comment section. As was typical, about half of them were the Gotham hashtag. A few others were eat the rich jokes, but there was one thread that made Tim question if he was still asleep. Some random dweebs with no brain-cells seemed to think his mom was . . . Batwoman?

Tim squinted. Bat*woman*, not girl? Did people not know the names of their local vigilantes? Wait, no, Bruce had mentioned something about a new mask popping up. But that lady was as white as a new gym sock and had bright red hair. She looked nothing like Janet.

Tim chucked his phone on the floor and buried himself back into his covers. The Internet was officially stupid.

Moments later, he bolted upright again, hair a ball of static as he scrambled for his phone.

The article had said Janet was in *Montreal?* She and Jack were supposed to be in Paris!

***

Tim video-called Janet during lunch at school the next day. He was hiding in an empty hallway, blinking sleep out of his eyes. This was supposed to be his naptime, but he had to communicate with people instead. Bleh.

Janet answered on the final ring and glared at the screen. She wore a black, form fitting suit and earrings with sharp, dagger-like tips.

“Child of mine, make it quick. I am on my way to a meeting,” she said. Her high heels clicked against the tile.

“Why aren’t you in Paris?” Tim said, forgoing any greetings. “You didn’t tell me you were leaving. What gives?”

Janet stopped mid-stride, then glanced around the hall. From what Tim could see, she was in a sky-rise overlooking Montreal, the sky overcast with low-hanging clouds. It made for a gloomy atmosphere, but Tim's irritation was brighter than the sun.

"We had to leave," she said. "It was too dangerous."

Tim's rant about healthy communication died in his throat. "What?"

Janet tucked an errant strand of hair out of her face. "If I were on my own, it would not have been an issue. However, your father's condition takes precedence. I cannot afford a grievous injury as it would get in the way of my ability to aid his recovery. Relocation was the simplest solution. We are staying with some of his old friends. I find them quite boring, but he seems to enjoy their company. I do wish Lily stopped trying to be my friend, however. I do not want any of those. Too tedious."

"Wait, wait, what do you mean dangerous?" Tim said, backtracking to the important stuff. Like Janet, he couldn't care less about Jack's old buddies. "Is this . . . About the thing you told me about in your letter?"

She'd said they were in the clear for now. She was going to take care of it as soon as Jack was back on his feet, but if trouble had followed them from São Paulo nothing would stop Tim from getting his parents back to Gotham ASAP so they could face the problem together, like families were supposed to.

"No, that is not an immediate threat," Janet said, lips pursed. She glanced at something in the distance. Her earrings flashed silver and sharp. "This is something different. Something worse."

Goosebumps rose on Tim's arms.

"I have to go," Janet said, continuing her march down the hall. "This meeting is important to your father, and I refuse to disappoint him. You will have to call him if you want a proper conversation."

"But—" Tim began.

“I will talk to you later,” she said, as close to gentle as she got, “but I must go.”

Tim frowned. He missed when Janet didn’t have a job. They’d spent hours on the phone when Jack was in his coma, but the 9-5 workweek had taken that from them. It needed to be abolished. Now.

“And hatchling?” Janet said, pausing by another window.

“Yeah?” Tim said.

Janet’s eyes were as cold as Arctic ice. “Stay out of Paris.”

The call cut as she hung up.

. Normally, the abrupt dismissal would make Tim happy, but today he stood in the empty corridor, phone clutched in one hand as he rubbed his arm in the other. It was winter, so of course it was cold. Still . . . He couldn’t shake the chill crawling over him from that conversation.

What on earth had made Janet Drake *run?*

***

He tried to put the conversation out of his mind. When that failed, he tried to research what was up with Paris. Neither did any good. Tim had no idea what he was looking for, and without some kind of criteria to narrow his search he might as well have been looking for a diamond in a pasta factory. If he wanted to figure out what Janet was talking about, he’d have to corner her during another phone call. Not that she’d tell him; she now had an acute distrust of the ‘magic boxes’ now, and wouldn’t say anything important unless it was in person or through convoluted courier message. Given her and Tim’s situation, that was really, really sucky.

He thought about asking Bart to deliver letters between them, then remembered the Incident that made Jack and Janet leave Gotham, and nixed that idea. No messages, too risky.

To distract himself, Tim tried to busy himself with other things; tag-teaming the Robin mantle with Steph, helping Dick try to 'win' Babs back in increasingly unhinged ways, dragging Jason back to the manor for hoard time, helping Alfred improve his recipes, etc., etc. Easy, fun stuff, and each time it went well the tension bled from his shoulders, and the sun seemed brighter as March came to a close.

Jack was right, time helped heal all wounds. It was getting easier to fall asleep. Eating food wasn't as hard anymore. When Tim woke up, he wasn't tasting Janet's blood on his tongue. Tim could almost pretend he was back to normal.

"Tim . . ."

Tim looked up from his laptop. He'd been puttering in his room, making a new code to send to Babs for fun, even though she hadn't been answering his Discord messages. Something big hero crisis had been happening that had been eating up her attention all day. She'd tried to explain it to him, but another notification had distracted her, and Tim had stopped trying to bother her. All he knew that it wasn't in Gotham, so it wasn't his problem.

Dick stood in the doorway, washed out by the setting sun. It was hard to see his face because of the lighting, but he looked ashen.

"Dick?" Tim said, getting to his feet. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

His heart seized. Had Dick been injured somehow? Was it permanent harm? Were his acrobat days over? Tim rushed over and circled his human, grabbing whatever limbs he could to inspect. Nothing *seemed* out of the ordinary, but it could be an invisible hurt. A tumor? Yes, it could be a tumor. They had to get Dick to the MRI machine now, then find an immortal chakra master to expel the cancer with marital art powers—

"Tim, buddy, calm down," Dick said, grabbing Tim by the shoulders. "I'm fine. Breathe for me."

"Why would I do that? I'm *fine,"* Tim said, trying to wiggle free. If he transformed, he could drag Dick down to the Batcave's medical bay. "You're the one I'm worried about. Did something happen? Are you dying? Has something gone wrong? Dick?"

His bendy human wasn't smiling, and that was bad. Worse than bad. Dick *always* smiled.

"Is it my dad?" Tim said. His voice wobbled. "Are he and Mom okay?"

Last he'd heard, Jack was acing physical therapy, and Janet had fired two board members who'd been embezzling funds from DI. They'd been settling into their temporary home in Montreal without any problems, and there hadn't been any other attacks on the company. Had that changed? Were they in danger again, with them too far away for Tim to reach in time?

"No, no they're doing fine." Dick closed his eyes. "But you're right, something happened, just—just not to them. Tim, I need you to stay calm, alright? And maybe sit down."

Tim's bad feelings grew stronger, like a weed wrapped around his throat. "Why?"

Dick took a deep breath, then squeezed Tim's arms. The acrobat's face was weary, and his eyes were shadowed under heavy bags. He gently guided Tim to sit on the corner of his bed, as carefully as if he were made of spun sugar.

"It's Bart and Kon," Dick said. "They're dead."

Chapter End Notes

Told you.

Going, Going, Gone (4)

Chapter Summary

The reason Tim hates emotions is that when they hit, they hit hard.

Chapter Notes

What you're about to witness is about 4k of Sad Dragon hours, featuring a good hoard that's doing their best (but their best might not be enough).

On some happier news, this chapter marks 1 million words I've posted on Ao3! 🥳

On a less happy note, please read the content warnings for this chapter. Tim is in a bad place. If you are too, I recommend enjoying some of the more fluffy chapters instead of this one (although there is some excellent comfort from the Bats here, if you like that).

▶ Content Warnings

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dragons didn't have friends, but Tim did, and he was supposed to have kept them safe, his body wrapped tight around theirs while stained-glass wings hid them from harm. Instead, they were dead, and their absence left his heart in a thousand fragments of glass.

"Shh, shh, it's okay," Dick whispered. His hands rubbed big circles on Tim's back. "Let it out, I've got you."

Tim's fingers twisted into Dick's shirt so hard they tore little holes. He wanted to shove Dick away. He wanted to cling harder. The air tasted like tears, and he choked on his own heart.

When Jason died, Tim had sobbed for hours. Janet had to help him learn to react like a proper dragon. No tears, because those accomplished nothing. Feelings were meant to fuel the fires of love and vengeance, not wallow someone in misery, which was why Tim had spent two years premeditating a murder and became a superhero in the process. He'd ached and hurt, but he'd at least had something to show for it.

That wasn't what happened after Haiti. Tim had cracked like hot glass in cold water, fractured by invisible fault lines, and hadn't known how to pick himself up. Janet's lessons were gone and in their place was loathing. Hoards were about love; Tim existed to protect and cherish his, but he'd almost ripped it to pieces. His dragon side, something he could always count on, had turned its sharp edges on his mother and nearly finished what Obeah Man started. Until then, Tim had always been able to trust his instincts, but now he knew they'd only put people he loved in danger. If being a dragon was really so monstrous, it'd be better not to act like one at all. At least, then he couldn't hurt anyone else.

But Bart and Kon were dead. If Tim had been there, teeth bared and claws sharp, he could've saved them. Instead, he'd been holed up in Gotham, wallowing like a coward.

"Shh, shh," Dick said again, rocking him gently. "Tim, breathe."

Tim couldn't. If he opened his mouth either fire or venom would come out, and that'd hurt Dick. Even as Tim's teeth lengthened and his body tensed, he made himself stay in control. Hoard was safe. Hoard was good. *They* weren't the ones he wanted to hurt.

He grit his teeth, holding back a growl as Dick whispered for him to calm down. Tim was *done* being calm. He wanted to raze the earth and watch it burn. Janet was right, being sad solved nothing. He wanted blood and carnage, and he wanted it *now.*

There was only one problem; there was nobody to kill.

Dick had already told him what happened. Superboy Prime, an alternate-world version of Kon, came to take names and murder his variants. It'd been all hands on deck—all hands, except Tim's—and the battle ended in a tragedy that left Kon dead and Superboy Prime on death's door.

Bart was the one who dealt the final blow. Bart, sweet and easily distracted, had finished what Kon started by running faster than thought. He ran so fast that nobody could keep up; so fast that trenches were gouged three feet deep into the earth where he'd dug his heels in and whirlwinds spun into tempests over the ocean; so fast that he'd phased into pure energy, like lightning running; so fast that when he body-slammed Superboy Prime into the speedforce the clone had been disintegrated on impact, obliterating him from existence.

So fast, that Bart did too.

Tim didn't understand the speedforce. Nobody did, not even the Flashes. But everyone who talked about it agreed on one thing; once it grabbed you, that was it. No matter how fast you thought you were, it would swallow you whole, until only echoes of your soul remained. Bart's natural hyperspeed already put him dangerously in-tune with it, and in the thick of the fight he wouldn't have been able to ground himself enough to resist it.

Impulse was just . . .

"You back with me, Timmy?" Dick said softly.

Tim shook his head and whispered, "Bart's *gone."*

Kon too. Both of them, like they'd never even been. It was almost too painful to think about. Kon had been a strange, bizarre buddy Tim wanted to keep close for the rest of his life, and Bart was Tim's best friend, two seconds and a text away. Now, Tim's messages would be left on read because there was no one there to answer him. There would be a coffin with Impulse's name on it, but it would be empty, just like Tim's promises to keep him safe.

It'd be better if Superboy Prime were still alive. At least then, Tim could hunt him down and melt the guy's bones and make him hurt a thousand times worse than what'd been done to his friends. But even that was taken from him. There was no body, no bones, no trace of the villain. Bart, Kon, and Superboy Prime died together, with only fading footprints and static left behind.

"Wally's arranging the funeral," Dick said, carding his fingers through Tim's hair. "He and the other speedsters are putting a memorial together in the Flash museum."

"Wally? That doesn't make sense," Tim said, voice cracking. "He hates Bart."

They were always fighting and yelling. Wally couldn't stand Impulse, and the feeling was mutual.

Dick kissed Tim's forehead. "Sweetheart, we never know the depths someone cares about us. Bart and Wally fought a lot, but they were family. I know… I know a statue in Central City isn't much, but sometimes remembering a person is all we can do for them."

It should've been comforting. Should've helped soothe the cuts on his soul. Maybe a memorial helped humans heal, but . . .

Tim turned bleary, red eyes to Dick. "But Bart was *mine."*

He didn't hoard concrete and marble. It didn't matter whether the statue looked like Bart, it *wouldn't be him.*

Tim should've been there. Tim should've died instead. That's what dragons were meant to do when hoard was in danger. There was no point living if everything they loved was gone. If he wasn't so useless and weak, he could've helped.

He could've done *something,* because anything would be better than this; too far away and too late to do anything but grieve.

"I know," Dick said. His voice cracked. "But there's nothing you can do."

Dick's arms were warm and strong, even though Tim didn't deserve comfort. Tim's anger had nowhere to go. It was drowning him.

Tim curled into Dick and tried to find his feet, but without Bart and Kon, the only thing he could do was fall.

***

The funerals were on a Friday. Tim didn't go.

The memorials were erected with ceremony and aplomb; one for Impulse, or for Superboy. Tim refused to even look at pictures of them.

The wake was somber. Everyone but Tim and Bruce attended. It'd probably cause gossip for Batman, one of the League founders, to not be there, but Bruce said Jason was body-doubling him in the suit, so it wouldn't matter. Bruce said he was staying home for Tim.

They were in Bruce's room, curled up on his stupidly huge bed. Rain pelted the windows, curtains open so he and Tim could watch the drops race down the glass. When Tim was small, he used to pretend they were racing.

His head was on Bruce's chest, listening to his hoard member's heart beat slow and steady. It'd been nearly an hour since Bruce found him beating his knuckles bloody on one of the bags downstairs and made him come here for hoard time instead. Tim's hands ached, the scabs covered with Band-aids. His ears rang and his vision was blurry in the corners.

"Champ," Bruce said, while rain fell in sheets outside, "tell me what's going through your head."

That was a bad idea. Nobody deserved that; *Tim* didn't even want to be in his head.

"Tim, please," Bruce said, quiet. "You're scaring us."

Was he? How? Tim tried to remember the last few days, but couldn't. The rain grew louder. The only thing he could recall since Dick gave him the news were his emotions, and he didn't want to think about those.

His hand shook, so he clutched it a fist.

Bruce took it and uncurled Tim's fingers with slow, deliberate actions. Raw, half-moon cuts decorated his palms.

"Do you want me to call your dad?" Bruce said. "Or your mom?"

"No," Tim whispered. "I just . . ."

Thunder rolled outside, like the clouds couldn't tell the difference between laughing and screaming.

"I just want to hurt someone," Tim said, "so they feel as bad as me."

His skin was electric with wrath. It'd been building since Haiti, like static transforming into lightning. The scales of pain could not be rebalanced because without vengeance there could be no justice. Without justice, no solace.

"You're not going to hurt anyone, Tim," Bruce said, keeping his eyes fixed on the window.

"I will," Tim said brokenly, "B, I think—I think I'm going to kill someone."

He couldn't keep losing people. It was breaking something inside him piece by piece. Soon, the only part of him left would be the monster. Tim used to love his dragon half; took pride in its strength and viciousness. But it frothed beneath his skin, boiling mad and ready to snap. It wasn't him. It wasn't *safe.*

"I don't want to be a monster, B," Tim said, breath hitching. "I promise. I just—"

He just didn't know how to be anything else.

Bruce lifted Tim's chin, forcing their eyes to meet. Bruce's were grayish blue, like storm clouds over a graveyard.

"You're not a monster," Bruce said. "You're hurting and scared, like I was once. I was drowning in myself. Do you know what made it better?"

Tim shook his head. He couldn't even remember yesterday.

"You," Bruce said. "You never gave up on me, Tim. Not once, even when I deserved it. You helped me remember how many people love me. Let me do the same for you."

“I don’t—” Tim swallowed. “*Batman* needs a Robin. It doesn’t go both ways.”

“Is that what you’d tell Dick and Jason about their time in the suit?” Bruce said, arching an eyebrow. “That they were just there to help me?”

“No,” Tim said. “But—”

“You’re not going to hurt anyone, because I won’t let you,” Bruce said. “That includes yourself, Tim.”

The cuts on Tim’s palm stung. He hadn’t meant to do that.

“I’m sorry,” Tim said. “I’m trying to be good. I promise.”

He was trying so *hard,* but it never seemed to work.

“You don’t need to be good,” Bruce said, pressing his forehead against Tim’s. “I just want you to be safe.”

The rain pelted the glass. The lights were off and the shadows long. Hundreds of miles away, Kon-El and Bart Allen were being laid to rest, dozens of voices whispering gratitude and sympathy for two people gone too soon.

Tim stayed in a lightless room, curled around his favorite human, and tried to weather it.

***

After the funeral, Tim got worse. Waynes were trying their best, but Tim was wrath in physical shape, and his anger had nowhere to go.

He threw vases, cracked windows, set fires. One moment, Tim was fine. The next, another antique chair was ashes. Tim was on permanent leave from school for his classmates' safety. Dick said he might have to repeat a year.

It was a big 'whatever.' Tim didn't have the capacity to care. Everything was blurry, like the world was covered in a thin veneer of fog. That wasn't good. A little voice in Tim's head kept telling him to talk to someone about that. It sounded like Jack. Jack who was also gone. Not forever (like Bart and Kon) but far away because Tim wasn't supposed to go near him. If he did, something terrible would happen. Someone would get hurt.

People always got hurt around Tim.

Tim was functioning, but not enough to fool himself that he was okay. Insomnia turned into research binges; worry for his hoard transformed into stalking them through Gotham at night, avoiding Babs' cameras so it took hours to track him down and even longer to catch him.

"Come on, Tim," Jason said after spending the better part of the night tracking him down and dragging him back to the manor. "Just stay home. You're not helping anyone like this. The over-protectiveness is going too far; we know how to handle ourselves on the field."

Tim dug his fingers deeper into the weave of his temporary uniform. He'd grabbed a nondescript, black one to blend in with the shadows. "So did Bart and Kon."

Jason didn't have anything to say to that.

The Waynes were in a conundrum; let Tim wander Gotham and potentially murder the next person who got a lucky hit on a Bat, or use all their resources to contain him. Short of drugging or tasering him, there wasn't an easy way to take Tim out of commission, and Bruce refused to do either of those.

"It's not safe for you to be on patrol. You know this, I know this." Bruce said after several more nights passed. Tim didn't know how many. He wasn't counting. Time wasn't real. "Currently, you're a danger to others. This is an established fact."

“Doesn’t matter,” Tim said. He shook his head, hair in his eyes. He needed to wash it, but there wasn’t time. He needed to keep eyes on the Waynes. If they weren’t nearby, they were in danger. He had to keep them close. “I have to keep an eye on you.”

Bruce squatted beside him. They were on the roof of a motel, neon billboard behind them. Tim didn’t remember how he got here, just that he’d been following Bruce.

“Robin, it matters,” Bruce said. “Remember what we talked about? No hurting people.”

“I know,” Tim said, hugging himself. “But if you get hurt—”

“I have three to six vigilantes on call at a given moment to protect me,” Bruce said. “I’m more worried about you. Be rational.”

Anger hit Tim’s bloodstream like lightning on a pine tree.

“Rational?” Tim hissed. He stabbed a finger at Bruce. “*You’re* not being rational. I’m not stupid, B; every time someone makes me stay behind, they get hurt or *die,* so I can’t leave you alone, or you’ll be next. I can’t lose anyone else, B. *I can’t.”*

Bruce had no right—no *place*—telling him what to do with his remaining hoard. Tim was barely surviving this. Another blow would shatter him.

Tim braced himself for a fight as Bruce loomed to his full height. Instead, the man sighed and pulled him into another hug, like they were back in the manor the day of the funeral. His gauntlets were ridged with spikes, but the gloves felt almost soft as he cradled Tim.

“I’m not asking you to leave us to the wolves,” Bruce said. “Just take care of yourself too. You can’t keep anyone safe if you aren’t alright.”

Tim gripped Bruce’s forearm, scratching the armor. “I can’t be alright unless I’m with you.”

Too far away and Tim was useless. He was fast, but not fast enough to jump in front of a bullet if he was several miles away from the fight. He had to be better—stronger, faster, closer—or more of his hoard would end up dead.

Bruce rubbed circles on his back the same way Dick had when he'd given Tim the bad news. A moment passed before he sighed.

"Can you promise to remain a noncombatant?" Bruce said.

Tim frowned. "What?"

"No biting, no venom, no fire," Bruce said. "Just your bo and blunt weaponry, self-defense only. I'm . . . concerned . . . that you're not in the proper mental condition for regular patrol, but if you stay with me or a teammate and don't initiate conflict, we can compromise."

Tim's shoulders slumped, the anger vanishing as soon as it'd come. "You mean it?"

Bruce nodded.

Tim buried his head into Batman's chest, temper fading down to dull embers. He didn't need permission, but it soothed him regardless.

"Robin, I need to make this clear," Bruce continued. "Your job is to look after us, nothing else. You've proven yourself prone to escalating conflict during times of mental duress, so you are to *stay out* of combat. If anyone is maimed or severely injured, you're done for good. Understand?"

Tim nodded, but it was a lie. He understood, but no matter how bad the fight, Tim would jump in if his hoard was harmed.

"Good. Come on then," Bruce said, wrapping an arm around Tim. The cape rested heavy on his shoulders. "Let's get you a proper suit."

Tim let himself be led to the Batmobile, keeping a hand on Bruce's utility belt to ground himself, and ignored the aggression still lurking in his bones.

It didn't work. The monster growled inside him, like a tiger pacing its cage. The bars were thin, rusted. All it'd take was one push to crawl out.

***

Push came to shove less than a week later. Nobody was hurt. Nobody died. Nobody even knew Tim's paper mache heart was in tatters. It wasn't even a big thing that did it; Tim's shaky coping crumbled the moment he opened his texts.

Bart: hey Tim when cann we hangg out? Mx got me adog. You can't eat it but it needs a name! Comeplayplayplayplay—

Tim: Not now, maybe later.

Tim: Soon. Promise.

Except later had never come.

Tim stood in his room. The clutter of a thousand obsessions, from rocks to empty soda cans, crowded him. Soulless, inanimate things with no poofy hair or dumb leather jackets; no weird 30th century slang or half Luthor DNA; just stuff. Dumb, useless stuff.

Tim spun and threw the phone at the wall. It crashed into a shelf of quartz and scattered the crystals across the floor. Several chunks shattered when they hit the ground.

A distant, chiding cry of "*Master Tim!*" echoed from two floors below. Alfred probably thought he was getting into the fine china again.

Tim grabbed a random jacket off the floor and stomped to the garage, grabbing the Redbird's keys from the wall. He was out of the house and down the driveway in less than three minutes.

If he wasn't certain he'd devolve into an uncontrollable rage, he would've transformed into his dragon-shape and hidden in the clouds. But even in his current mood, he knew better than to transform.

His heart beat in his chest like a countdown. The cage in his heart creaked as the monster stirred.

***

Tim stayed with Babs for a few hours, then left when she started trying to talk to him about feelings. Jason was also a bust. He kept trying to make Tim eat. Apparently, he was losing too much weight. Whatever.

Steph's place was also a no-go; seeing her and her mom together made him jealous. Dumb. Tim had never been jealous of anyone in his life. It was just—her mom was *right there,* and had all her fingers. It wasn't fair.

Tim went home. *Really* home. Except Drake manor was empty and didn't smell like Janet anymore. Tim curled up in the corner of his old dark room and buried his head in his hands.

People kept telling him life would get better, but things only seemed to get worse. He wished none of this had ever happened. That he had Kon and Bart back. He'd do anything to see them again.

His eyes landed on a copy of a photograph hanging on the drying line. It was identical to the original film, wherever that was stored.

A bad idea struck, and Tim was too far gone to throw it away. After Haiti, he'd only been able to wait and hope Jack and Janet recovered. Bart and Kon never would, but that didn't mean Tim had to let them stay that way.

He could fix this.

***

He didn't go back to Wayne manor that night. Or the next. It physically hurt not to be there, but his hoard would probably stop him or tell him to rest again, and Tim couldn't afford to do that. He just needed the right tools, and they were easily found. Lex Luthor was smart, but not smart enough to outfox Tim Drake three Red Bull's into his research spiral.

There was an an abandoned Lexcorp facility south of Detroit. It'd been a branch of Cadmus before it was shut down.

Tim gripped the edge of the table in his childhood home, breathing hard. This was it; he could fix things. Finally, really fix them. It'd be like none of this ever happened.

The little voice screamed at him and said this was a mistake, but it was easily ignored.

***

The slap came hard and fast. Tim's cheek ached from the impact.

"How could you?" Cassie said, tears in her eyes.

Tim looked at the failed cloning tanks. Ninety-nine experiments before he was caught. Ninety-nine attempts to fix things, wasted.

"What is *wrong* with you, Robin?" Cassie said, fists balled. "Our friends are dead, and your solution is to make *more of them?"*

Papers lay strewn around them. Stolen Cadmus reports, studies on cloning, pages upon pages of medical research and home brew experiments. They were crumpled and nearly illegible.

Cassie had been worried. She'd come looking for him and, like an idiot, Tim had let her in when she came knocking. She said the Waynes were worried. Super worried; worried enough to call Young Justice and ask them to help find him.

Silly worrywarts, that's what Tim had to say to that. He'd left the manor because they were trying to make him accept that things were bad forever, but that was wrong because Tim was going to make them *right.* Maybe. Tim didn't know if he was remembering that correctly. He hadn't slept in a long time. Everything was blurry. How long had he been down here? Did it matter? Cassie looked ready to kill him, so maybe.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, running a hand through greasy hair.

"Sorry isn't going to cut it, Tim," Cassie snapped. "This is too far."

He grabbed his shirt collar and twisted it. Around them, a hundred machines beeped and whirred like siren songs. "I—I just want to fix things. I want them back, Cassie. Don't you?"

Her expression didn't soften so much as shatter. She and Tim stood a few feet apart, a dozen pages of cell theory on the floor between them.

"It wouldn't be them, Tim," She said, hair falling over her eyes. It was longer now, almost to her shoulders. Since when did that happen? It hadn't been *that* long since he'd seen her, had it? "It wouldn't be real."

Tim wiped his eyes. They were dry. He was too dehydrated to cry. "But it would've been *something."*

He'd crawl on hands and knees to get them back. Trade his soul, cut off his hands, *anything* if it meant not losing his hoard. If—If this worked, he wouldn't need to be sad or angry anymore. His instincts would finally stop telling him to hurt people. He'd be *better.*

Right?

“Don’t talk to me anymore,” Cassie said. “I just—I need time, Tim. And this is too much. It’s seriously messed up. If you can’t see that, I don’t want to know what else is in your head.”

“Cassie, I—”

She stepped out of grabbing range. Tim’s hand fell as if he’d been stung.

“If you really cared about them, you’d never try to replace them,” Cassie said. “If this is all being hoard means to you, then count me out.”

She turned on her heel and left.

The cloning lab kept beeping, its machines sedate and orderly.

Tim stood shaking and shivering where Cassie left him. This wasn’t how it worked. Hoard couldn’t just *leave.* He—he couldn’t let it happen. *He* decided who he kept, not the other way around. She had to come back.

Except Cassie was right. He was a bad hoard keeper. A bad dragon. A bad friend.

A computer dinged behind him. The command prompt for another cloning attempt popped up, like a printer asking if he wanted more copies. Pretend things, imitations. Not real treasure.

Tim swiped the desktop onto the floor. It shattered into a hundred pieces, spilling nanowafers and wires across the linoleum. He stood still, balling his hands into fists. They stung with a now familiar ache as Tim’s nails dug into the skin, but Bruce wasn’t here to fix that now. Nobody was.

He took a shuddering breath; Cassie was right to go. He couldn’t keep his humans safe, so he shouldn’t have any. He didn’t deserve a hoard.

That went for friends too.

***

Bruce had only been half an hour behind Cassie. He'd had to take the Batplane.

Tim met him outside the lab, arms awkwardly crossed, and braced for a lecture.

Instead, he got a hug.

"You went dark, we couldn't find you. Don't you ever do that to me again," Bruce said, fierce and angry but warm as he enveloped Tim in the Batcape. A shroud of armor, black as the night and twice as heavy.

"I'm sorry, I won't," Tim said, burying himself into the fabric. "Promise."

Behind them, the abandoned facility continued to burn. A corner of a college-ruled notebook scribbled with chemistry equations flitted to the ground, smoldering into ash before it was blown away by the wind.

***

"Tim" Steph said a few days later, voice crackling over the comms. "Did you really leave all the Young Justice group chats? Greta called me and said she was worried. You even took yourself out of the civilian ones."

Tim didn't look up from his keyboard. He was manning comms in the Batcave, isolated underground where he couldn't hurt or be hurt.

"Yeah," he said, clearing his throat. "I don't want to talk to any of them."

He had a new number too—untraceable—and had left Do Not Contact messages to the team on every other platform.

“Are you sure? This isn’t like you,” Steph said. “Do you want me to—”

“I’m *fine,”* Tim said. He switched channels and went back to surveying the bugs in the mayor’s office.

He’d learned his lesson; no friends, no clones, no way to fix anything that’d gone wrong. Young Justice was gone, and Tim was never talking to them again.

He hid himself deeper in the Batchair. The cave stood hollow around him, empty save for the quiet tapping of computer keys.

Chapter End Notes

Protectively hiding Cassie behind me I know what she did was a dick move, but she's my precious babygirl. Don't bee too hard on her. She's Going Through it too. 😭

Meanwhile, our other precious babygirl in the spirit world . . .
Cass: Hate this.
Shiva: Alternate planes are horrid. We should kill the one responsible.
Cass; No.
Cult leader: Thank you.
Cass: Need him to get back home. Then we make him wish were dead.
Cult leader: ....Nevermind, no thank you. I'm not helping get you back to earth if you're just going to hurt me!
Shiva *holding a knife*: You will, or I'll make sure this lands between your ribs, regardless of how hard my spawn tries to protect you.
Cult leader: W-why not stay here? It was a hellscape! Sure, we're in an almost actual hell, but it's not too bad. It sure beats anything happening on Earth.
Shiva: I. had. one. level. of Angry Birds left. If my save data was corrupted in our brewhaha, you'll wish this was Hell.
Cass *cracks knuckles*
Cult leader: ...let's get you both home.

Bonus details:
Bart has two canon deaths: Dying taking out Superboy Prime, and another where he's killed by some of the Flash Rogues and his evil twin Inertia. I almost went with the second one, but it made more sense to have him and Kon die the same way here, so he gets yeeted into the speedforce instead. If you're wondering where Max Mercury is, he's going into full Zen

Master mode to see if he can find Bart in the speedforce. Currently, it's not going well (sad speedster sounds).

Ignite (3)

Chapter Summary

Jason waxes poetic, Tim goes on patrol, and things go wrong very, very fast.

Chapter Notes

It's April 3rd, which makes this Happy Families second anniversary! Coincidentally, it's also the day this fic has reached over 400k views (I'm going to brag about this, please let me brag. I'm still not convinced I'm in a very long fever dream because the response to this fic has been INSANE)

Thank you everybody who has followed this fic. Whether you were here at chapter one or binged it yesterday, your comments and encouragement have meant the world to me. I don't think I would have been able to write over 300k (and counting) without you, and I'm excited to see what you think of the chapters to come. I don't know if there'll be a third anniversary post, since the story might be over by this time next year, so let's make this one extra special ❤️🥳

(aaaaaand on that note, it's time to go back to Tim's crash-out angst fest. Enjoy 😉)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April was quickly becoming Tim's least favorite month, because Jason wouldn't shut up about T.S. Eliot. Every other sentence was a quote from some old, stupid poem with lilacs or lilies or some random flower. The cruellest month indeed; Tim wanted to bang his head against a lamp post until he could get dibs on his father's coma.

"*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?"* Hood droned through the comms, obviously relishing each word. *"Son of man, you cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images, where the sun beats, and—"*

Tim subtly and with much maturity hissed and sent a wash of feedback into the channel. Everyone online—Babs, Bruce, Steph, and Jason—swore passionately.

"Very funny, Robin," Babs said. "You're going to give me tinnitus."

Tim hissed again, but quieter. His hands flexed on the edge of the roof he was sitting at, fingernails itching to turn into claws. Not transforming didn't usually bother him, but since he'd stayed human-shaped so long it was starting to get . . . Icky. Like waking up sore from a nap, with all his senses turned up a dial too high for comfort. Minor things that he could normally ignore were suddenly overwhelmingly irritating, such as Jason's obnoxious love for the classics.

"What's wrong, bitty bird?" Jason said. "Not a fan?"

His teasing tone was an insult to the dignity of all literature hating dragons past, present, and future.

"I'm actively wishing I were dead," Tim said, bristling. "When I kick the bucket, I'm going to find that stupid poet in the afterlife and punch all his teeth out."

Jason was bad enough quoting Austen and Shakespeare. Adding pretentious, modernist nut jobs whose poetry sounded like an official diagnosis was salt in the wound. Tim's wound, to be specific. T. S. Elliot deserved to burn in eternal hellfire for that alone.

"You're just jealous you couldn't revolutionize the concept of high art in the 1900s," Jason said. "You know I'm only reciting it for your sake."

Tim grit his teeth. "I told you, I'm *fine."*

After the trying-to-clone-Kon-and-Bart thing, Tim had been stuck to his hoard like glue. It'd gotten to the point that the Waynes were worried he'd spiral into a codependent mess. Tim didn't think he was *that* bad; he could still spend time alone, after all. Not very much, but that was just because his humans were very fragile; he didn't want to leave them alone too long in case they got hurt.

Tonight was a trial run. The Bats were easing him back into short solo patrols with consistent check-ins to hopefully curtail the "codependent, mentally ill" stuff they were worried about. Tim was humoring them. As long as he got to do his rounds—checking his run-down shrines, reporting minor crime, stalking his hoard for safety's sake—they could think whatever they wanted.

Jason was just being extra annoying, thinking Tim needed to hear his voice constantly to not freak out. Reciting edgy poetry to him was an attempt to make Tim feel better when feeling anything was in of itself torture. *That,* Tim was *not* a fan of.

"I'll get you to like classic literature one of these days," Jason said. "But I see I'm not wanted tonight. Hood, signing off. I've got a date with the Ben & Jerry's in my fridge."

There was a click as his comm went dark. The likelihood of Jason *actually* going to bed was slim to none. It was a little awkward, being in a family of crime fighters that specialized in taking down drug rings and trafficking operations when Bruce's son was a drug lord. There was a tactic agreement to turn a blind eye to Jason's stuff as long as it didn't cross any lines. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was what they had. Still, on the Batchannel they liked to pretend Jason wasn't hawking drugs, if only to save Bruce some stress.

But really, ice cream? What a terrible excuse. Jason was probably going to get a new shipment of whatever uncut stuff he was planning to sell down at the docks. He wasn't fooling anybody.

. . . The docks were pretty far away.

Tim sunk lower into his spot on the roof. Nobody else was talking on the channel. The silence was almost worse than *The Wasteland.* It was too still, and that gave Tim time to reflect on the last few months. Generally, he wasn't one to philosophize, but enough horrible things had happened this year that he was starting to make theories as to why.

Theory one, Tim had used up all his good luck, so now only negative karma remained. He'd be doomed to live through sad, awful eventss until he died.

Theory two, it do just be like that. Pure randomness, chance, and butterfly effects were curb-stomping him. He just had to deal with it and embrace the fact that he was an insignificant piece of dust in the tornado of life, and that in the end it was nothing personal.

Theory three, someone was actively out to get him.

He hoped the last theory was correct, because that meant he had a target. If Tim could find out who was responsible for ruining his life, he could unleash all his pent of rage on them in a slew of

violence that'd make the Joker's mutilated corpse admit he'd gotten off easy. The only problem was that Tim had a sinking suspicion the person to blame was himself.

It made sense. Bruce and the others could hem and haw about the details, but even if Bart and Kon's deaths had nothing to do with Tim, the fact of the matter was that everybody Tim knew was getting hurt or killed. Coincidences weren't supposed to be this vindictive.

"Boy Wonder, you still with us?" Babs said.

Tim startled and readjusted his comm. "Yeah, sorry. I was thinking."

It'd only been a few minutes, but Babs was already poking him back to reality. Apparently, Jason wasn't the only one being weird about leaving Tim alone. One would think *they* were the ones with separation issues.

"Hmm," Babs said, carefully neutral. "Don't hurt yourself. You in position?"

Tim peeked over the edge of the building. "Yup. Have been for a while."

He was in the Penguin's territory down in Otisburg, doing surveillance on a laundromat that was a possible location for an arms deal. Penguin was trying to get cheap guns off Blask Mask, so all the Bats were tracking down where the exchange would happen.

Currently, they'd already found three warehouses full of armed goods. Black Mask was getting sloppy. After tonight, they'd report the spots to Gordon, but first they needed to see if they could lure the Penguin out with easy bait, and that meant finding Black Mask's drop point.

The laundromat, sadly, was all dark windows, locked doors, and unoccupied chairs. It was only populated by ghosts, and even the streets were clear.

"It's empty," Tim whispered into the comm. "No guns, just lost socks and a Kiss the Cook apron on a hook by the door. Black Mask isn't running an op here tonight."

“Damn,” Babs said. “Robinette, you?”

The comm crackled as Steph unmuted herself.

“First of all,” Steph said with a sniff, “Robin is a gender-neutral name, so keep your sexist endearments away from me. Second, I’m working on it.”

“Better hurry, Robin 4.0,” Babs said. “There are still several places to check. You’re slow tonight.”

“I’m being *thorough.* Just because *some people—”* that was code for Bruce, “can speed through buildings in ten seconds flat doesn’t mean I have to. I’m a person of quality. Refinement. Grace—Ow!”

From the sound of the feedback, she must’ve stubbed her toe on something. Tim chuckled to himself, then felt weird for doing that. His laugh sounded rusty. He must not have done it recently. That . . . Probably wasn’t good.

“Do not compromise yourself,” Bruce growled into the channel. He was a few blocks away from Steph, if Tim recalled. They’d split up to cover ground faster.

“Mock me at your peril, masked man,” Steph said. “I’m going to prove I’m a *way* better vigilante than you tonight, so you can take your nitpicky ways and begone.”

She clicked the comm off so she’d have the last word. That got Tim to smile too. Classic Steph.

Tim glanced at the laundromat again. It was deader than a doornail and twice as lame.

“O, I’m done here, anywhere else you need checked out?” he said, getting out his grapple. It’d be quicker if he could use his wings, but that meant transforming. Also, secret identities were still a thing, and after reading Janet’s letter Tim was a lot more invested in maintaining his.

Babs typed in a few commands, and a set of coordinates appeared on Tim's wrist computer. "Check those out for me, Robin 3.0. They should be in your neck of the woods."

Tim sighed. "Fine. I wish it wasn't such a slow night."

Boring. He yearned for action, although the Bats wouldn't approve of him engaging in a fight. He was still technically on probation, which was why he was staying within a few miles of another Bat at all times. The idea was that they could stop him if he lost his temper, but was silly on principle. Tim was much faster than they gave him credit for. More importantly, they'd never actually seen him *mad.* The last few months of pathetic sadness were not normal, but they should be glad at how easy it made handling him. If the simmering rage he'd been nursing since Bart and Kon died ever found a target, it was game over.

"Yeah, it's peaceful, so sad," Babs said. "How about after you finish up, you come join me in the Clocktower? I could use an extra set of eyes on the feeds."

Tim ducked his head, eyes on the street. "Maybe."

Babs had been trying to keep him close lately. Said she wanted to keep tabs on him in case he needed someone to talk to. Tim didn't know how to feel about that. But, since that's how he felt about most things, he didn't pay it any mind.

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The next two locations were also busts. They were small businesses that were closed for the night. Nothing alarming about them. It was weird that they were on Oracle's list.

"Why did you put these in the maybe pile?" Tim asked her as he headed toward the last location. It was past midnight, getting to the point in the night where everything felt heavier and slower for no reason.

"The owners have all gone missing," Babs replied. "I only noticed because they don't have automated payments for their rent. Those buildings are all under threat of eviction because nobody's paying the check. Nobody would suspect them for a last minute gun swap, and odds are they wouldn't be used for a drop when a new business rolled in later on. It's a solid set up."

Tim swung onto the roof of a small three-story building made of bricks. It smelled like mold, even from outside. Mold and something metallic. He found a window and pulled a multi-tool out of his kit. Teasing the window open was easy.

Inside was trashed and stained. The carpet was bloated with growths, the walls were peeling wallpaper, and it stank of rot. But again, there was that other smell. Tim licked the air and tensed.

“Our of curiosity,” he said quietly, slinking out of the office he’d entered from to head downstairs, “do you know why the owners are missing?”

The floorboards creaked under his weight. Tim stood on the balls of his feet and moved near the walls to muffle the noise.

“I’ve got my theories,” Babs said. “Black Mask could’ve hired a hitman to take out the owners and is using their vacancies to his advantage for a one time gun shipment. Another possibility is that it’s just normal Gotham turnover and this is unrelated to the arms deal. I like that theory a lot.”

“Why?” Tim asked, reaching the bottom step to the basement. In front of him was a metal door with latches running down the entire side. Those tended to be red flags.

“Call me wishful,” Babs said. “But sometimes I like to toy with the idea that not everything in our life is carefully orchestrated. There’s something comforting about that. I may be the spider in the center of an information web, but I enjoy a bit of chaos.”

Tim picked the locks on the door and carefully pushed it open. The hinges were soundless. The metallic scent was strongest here. Sickeningly so.

Once he was sure nobody was inside the basement, he turned on a flashlight and scanned the room. It was a good thing he was the one who’s searched here. His humans shouldn’t see this.

“That’s a cute theory, but I think you’re wrong this time,” Tim said, turning on his mask camera. “This seems pretty premeditated to me.”

Three bodies hung from hooks on the ceiling. Tim knew his camera's night vision wouldn't pick up all the details for Babs, but he wasn't going to describe it to her. They'd been tortured before they died. Excessively. Tim had heard enough of Jason's rants to know who'd done it. Black Mask had a distinct style, and little to no restraint.

"This doesn't make sense," Babs said. "Those are the owners, but none of their shops are being used for the drops. Why are they dead?"

"Maybe Black Mask was bored," Tim said. "Hood said the guy likes hurting people."

Playing with food was a concept Tim was well familiar with, but Black Mask obviously wasn't hunting people to munch on. He was just being a wasteful, violent creep. He was as bad as the people who'd killed Bart and Kon.

Tim clutched his flashlight a little tighter and repeated Bruce's three rules to himself. Now was not the time to get angry.

"Dammit Jason, pick up your comm," Babs muttered. "No dice, he's not answering. Did he tell you his route tonight?"

"Uh huh," Tim said. "You hear him; bed. He wanted ice cream too."

"We both know that was a lie," Babs replied. "Where is he really?"

Tim scratched his head, pulling up his mental file of Jason's usual routes. "Warehouses on the docks."

"Get over there," Babs said. "I need you to remind him that his fancy helmet isn't just for decoration; he needs to turn his comms back on, or get out of wherever is jamming them. After that, see if he's noticed any patterns in Mask's movements. There's something going on here beyond a simple drug deal."

Tim got out his grapple again. The docks were twenty minutes away. He'd have to backtrack to his motorcycle and drive over.

"What do you think it is?" Tim said as he exited the building through another window.

"I hope it's just him trying to upscale his business or something," Babs said. "But Black Mask isn't the type to sink resources on that. He only gets wasteful when it's personal, and offing several small business is *very* wasteful."

Tim pursed his lips. Escalating rogues were never a good thing. The last time a villain decided to get creative, Jason had died.

"Hang tight, Tim, I'm going to get Dick up," Babs said. "He can help too. I'll talk to you more in a few minutes."

Never mind that Dick had finished a long shift and was crashing at the Clocktower for a rare night off. Babs must have been very worried to roust him out of bed. That was another bad sign.

Ten minutes later and three streets over, Tim's comm crackled again. It wasn't Babs. He paused, still a long ways from his motorcycle, and tried to decipher what was being said over the static.

"B?" Tim said, pausing. "B, you're breaking up, what's wrong?"

"Stephanie," Bruce said. The lack of a codename was a siren. "She missed her last call in. I can't get a response. Do you have a read on her?"

Her check-in should've been eight minutes ago.

Tim tried to contact her on his private channel. No answer. He spammed her in another group one. Nothing. Finally, he tried to clock her tracking device. She'd started wearing one at Tim's insistence, after—after Kon and Bart—and it should've pinged her immediately.

Nothing.

A cold, sinking feeling curled in the bottom of his stomach, then slowly wound upward like a snake.

“Robin, calm down,” Babs said in the kind of voice that made him want to listen. Tim didn’t know when she’d gotten back. “Breathe.”

Oh. Right. He needed to do that. Deep breathes, not the shallow ones that Oracle could probably hear through the comms. Air was good. People needed that. Bad things happened if they didn’t get it. They could die.

His lungs hitched again. Tim spun on his heel, sprinting toward where Steph and Bruce had been patrolling. The bike could technically have been faster, except it was parked in the opposite direction and B and Spoy had been in rickety alleys with bad roads; Tim didn’t have time to navigate those.

Tim ran like he was in Haiti again. Like Bart and Kon were close enough to save. His legs became pistons as he ducked and wove through narrow cobbled streets, the alleys too choked with laundry lines and live wires to fly through if he’d transformed.

Halfway there, his comm crackled. It was Bruce. He was talking to someone, but it wasn’t Babs or anyone. It was—it was—

Someone was laughing in the background. Not a mad cackle like the Joker, but an ordinary, mean chortle that reminded Tim of gurgled glass.

“Let her go,” Bruce growled. “She’s not part of this.”

Tim tripped on a loose brick. He hit the ground elbows first, right on a nerve. He stumbled to his feet and kept running, teeth gritted against the pain.

“Oh, I think she is,” the other said. “Little bird’s been getting nosy in our business all month. Hasn’t anyone ever told you to be careful with your tin soldiers, Batman? I hope you’ve got another lying around. You’re going through them *quick.”*

Tim rounded a final corner. Gotham’s skyscrapers hemmed him in like teeth. A large, crooked brick building was where the road led, faded yellow and covered in graffiti. The Batmobile was parked at the end on the street, and three people were on the rooftop across the street, several stories up and lit by ten thousand flickering lights.

Bruce stood in the middle of the roof, hands raised and teeth gritted. His armor was scuffed and dirty, like he’d run through barbed wire. Near the edge of the building, lit by Gotham’s hazy smog, was a large man in a coat who had Steph in a headlock. It should’ve been an easy move to get out of, but Steph was barely struggling. Her uniform looked too dark—too red—and she wasn’t bantering.

“I said, *let her go,”* Bruce growled.

Just a hundred more feet. Tim wasn’t too late. He’d made it, he could still save—

The man smirked. “If you insist.”

A gunshot echoed off the buildings, mirrored in Tim’s comm. It was too fast for Bruce to disarm the man. Too sudden to track the bullet. Too close to dodge.

Tim’s mouth opened to scream, but he didn’t know if he made a sound. The world shrank to Steph’s face; the lenses of her mask widening in surprise, white and sightless as the man fired a bullet into her back with a small, dull revolver.

He let go of her. Instead of turning to fight, Steph fell like a doll with its strings cut, right off the side of the roof.

She didn’t try to catch herself.

Batman roared as he lunged for her, but the man was already firing his pistol again. Bruce had to dodge, costing him precious time. He was too far to help, and Steph was already two stories down.

She wouldn't make it.

There was white noise. A rush. A visceral, acidic ignition that set Tim's bones on fire. Four months of being too slow, too far away, too useless, narrowed into a split second of need. Tim did not think because thinking was too slow.

There was a way to go faster than fast. Tim wasn't supposed to do it in public. Jack had always forbidden it. Once, years ago, he had held Tim's face in his hands and begged him to always, *always* to hide. Blend in. Never let anyone know what he was, because then he'd be a target for the rest of his life and never be able to stop running.

"*You're one of a kind, kiddo,"* Jack had said. *"You have to treasure yourself more than anyone else, because the price tag on you is higher than almost anything in the world."*

Tim pounced, outstretched hands morphing into claws as his spine lengthened, wings sprouted, and a tail lashed in the air behind him. He threw himself forward with four months of desperation and two dead friends on his conscience, shredding his humanity to pieces behind him.

He caught Steph ten inches from the ground.

Tim tucked her against him and rolled. His flank landed on broken glass as his back collided with the building, but his hide wasn't pierced and Steph was safe.

He transformed back just as fast, laying Steph on the ground as Bruce fought the man on the roof. Tim should've been paying attention to that, making sure Batman didn't need backup, but he didn't.

"Spoy, Spoy," Tim said, cupping her face in his hands. "Spoy wake up. I need you—"

His uniform was wet. So was hers. Steph was covered in blood, spreading from a bullet wound on her back. He turned her over. She still didn't wake up. The hole was almost on her heart.

She wasn’t moving.

“No,” Tim said. He bunched her cape and pressed it against the bullet hole to staunch it. The yellow fabric bled almost black. “No, no, no—”

This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be happening again. Not to her. Not to Spoy. Not to the first friend he’d ever made. Not to her.

Babs was yelling into the comms, but her voice didn’t make words. It was just noise. Words didn’t exist anymore. There was just blood and asphalt and failure. He couldn’t save her. He couldn’t save anybody. He needed help. He needed—

“Bruce!” he screamed. “Bruce, *help!”*

He needed his hoard.

Chapter End Notes

Steph half an hour ago: Surely it won't hurt if I go dark for a few minutes to check out a possible lead that Bruce missed.
The gangsters Black Mask planted to murder Robin: Oh, it will.

Pour one out for the War Games arc, she didn't even get to start multiple gang wars yall. T-T

Implode (2)

Chapter Summary

Schrödinger's Robin and her emotional support dragon have a bad time.

Chapter Notes

Behold! An update!

The power of procrastinating important IRL things (and not wanting you guys to be stuck on this cliffhanger forever) gave me superpowers. Apologies for any typos; I went through it like 5 times with three different spell checks, but the sleeper typos are very stealthy. :(

Enjoy more angst! >:D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim's teeth chattered, stuttering over Bruce's name again, but the roar in his ears was so loud he didn't know if he'd made a sound. His gloved were soaked, the asphalt dug into his skin, Steph's eyes were hidden behind a shattered mask lens.

Someone was talking in his ear, their panicked voice telling him to calm down, but that was an impossible task. Steph still wasn't moving.

Static. A roar. A bit off swear.

"*Batman, do not pursue,"* the voice in Tim's ear said, so sharp it broke through the white noise. *"We'll track them down later. The Robins need you."*

Track them down? Someone was getting *away?* Tim's hands threatened to sharpen into claws as embers built in his throat, something vicious and hateful rising up inside him.

Steph coughed wetly beneath him, weakly grabbing at the road. Her head lolled, and she was gone again.

Just as quickly, the anger was gone. Tim bent over her, whispering pleas to anyone who would listen, but especially to Spoy. She needed to wake up, she had to be alright, if she wasn't—

A large, gauntleted hand rested on his back. Bruce knelt beside him, jaw bruised and teeth clenched, fury shrouded in black.

"Oracle, contact Leslie," Bruce barked.

Tim almost relaxed; his human was here, and Bruce could fix anything. They would be okay now, they had to be. Except he was kneeling in a pool of Steph's blood, her heartbeat thready under his hands, and the roaring in his ears was getting louder. Fixing anything sounded impossible.

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Tim saw everything in snapshots.

He was on the ground by Spoy, hands pressed against her back like a dam while it rained. Except, how could it be raining when there were no clouds?

He was helping Bruce transfer her to the Batmobile. He was in the backseat, helping staunch the blood while he whispered "no, no, no" to himself like a prayer.

He was pulled into a chair and told to stay there. He was screaming at whoever told him that. He was watching Leslie Thompkins take Steph into surgery while Bruce held him back, saying he was in no condition to watch because it'd only distract the doctor.

He was collapsed against Batman's chest, a tangle of limbs that didn't fit right anymore.

He was crying.

Tim grabbed his hair and pulled. It was getting long. Unruly. He still wouldn't let Alfred cut it. His fingernails dug into his scalp and cut his skin.

This kept happening. He kept *losing* people. He'd been so close and she'd still—no, no Steph was okay. He and Bruce got her to the doctor. She was going to make it. She had to. But—but why did she have to get hurt? Why did everyone Tim care about end up like this?

"No champ, don't do that," Bruce said softly. He made Tim uncurl his fingers, so gently it hurt.

Tim stared at his hands. Monstrous things; strange claws fused with his gloves, but human enough to look like costume additions instead of flesh. Had he been right, earlier? Was he the problem?

"Spoy is—she's—" Tim breathed.

"You caught her in time, Tim," Bruce said. "We'll just have to see if it was enough."

They were sitting on the floor of the clinic. Tim was pressed against Bruce, whose back was to the wall as fluorescent lights spilled across the room. It smelled like antiseptic and old blood, the last place the living lingered and the first place the dead occupied.

Tim shuddered, head bent, and begged whatever god or cosmic force existed to take him instead.

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Dick slammed the clinic doors open and ran to Tim, arms stretched open. Tim barely moved as he was embraced, now squashed between Batman and Nightwing. Dick tried to say something to him, but Tim didn't respond. After a few minutes, Dick turned his attention to Bruce.

"We finally got in contact with Hood, he's in pursuit of Black Mask's men," Nightwing said. "News on Spo—Robin?"

“I can check with Leslie,” Bruce said. “Take care of him.”

He unpeeled Tim from him and stood with a creak, vanishing down the hall.

Tim bit his lips to swallow a whine, and finally hugged Nightwing properly. Dick smelled like the Clocktower and Babs’ shampoo. His hair was tangled and wild because he’d been kicked out of bed and sent running across the city, but he was *here,* so that meant things had to get better. Dick was good at fixing things too.

“I messed up,” Tim whispered. “This is my fault.”

He should’ve transformed sooner, gotten there faster, *done* something. Steph might never have been hurt if he’d insisted on patrolling with her. He should’ve listened to his instincts—should’ve known that his humans were too delicate and helpless to be left to their own devices. He should’ve done so much more.

“None of this is your fault,” Dick said. “Don’t ever think that, Timmy. You did everything you could.”

Tim shook his head. “I said B’s name.”

Dick tensed minutely, but it was enough for Tim to feel.

“We’ll figure it out,” Nightwing said.

Tim curled his hands back into fists, feeling the sting of his fingernails through his gloves, and added this to his list of mistakes.

His ears twitched as the slow trudge of boots approached. Bruce stopped in the mouth of the hallway. His cowl was still on. It hid most of his expression, but Tim could tell something was wrong.

“What did Leslie say?” Tim asked, staggering to his feet as he shook off Dick. “Is Spoy okay?”

She had to be. Leslie was a medical human, one of the best. She could put anyone back together.

Bruce approached slowly. He put his hands on Tim’s shoulders and pulled him close. He smelled like the Batcave. Like home.

“I’m so sorry, Robin,” he said.

No.

“She’s gone.”

No.

“Leslie did her best,” Bruce said, “but the bullet was too close to her heart.”

That wasn’t possible. Tim had saved her. He’d caught her—he *couldn’t* have been too late. Not again.

“Robin—*Tim.”* Bruce whispered his name in the softest hiss. “Breathe.”

Why, Tim wanted to ask. Why were people always telling him to do that? They should’ve been telling that to Steph. She was the one who needed air. She—she was the one who was *dead.*

“I hope it was worth it, Batman,” Leslie said.

Tim peeked at her from around Bruce’s shoulder. A terrible numbness was starting to spread through his chest. It felt like the storm front to something else. Something worse.

Leslie Thompkins stood framed in the mouth of the hallway, graying hair haloed by the fluorescent lights. Her white clothes had small specks of red, and she glared at Bruce like her eyes were scalpels.

“Worth it?” Dick said in a low, piano-wire voice.

“Leslie, now is not the time,” Bruce said, carefully extracting himself from Tim to stand between him and Leslie.

“It’s never the time,” Leslie said, harsh and yet somehow pleading. “You won’t listen unless someone makes you. You can’t keep sending teenagers to hunt down crime lords. Black Mask’s men had her for over half an hour before she ended up on that roof. *Half an hour.* Do you know what they did to her, or do you want to stay ignorant for your own comfort?”

“Stop,” Bruce said. He tried to cover one of Tim’s ears with his gauntlet, but Tim shook him off.

“No, you need to stop,” Leslie said. “This isn’t a crusade. You can’t justify years of training Robins when this is the cost.”

“You can tell me later,” Bruce said, *“alone.* Robin shouldn’t hear this right now.”

“When should he then? When it’s *his* turn to be on the chopping block?”

Dick shoved past Bruce to jab his finger at her. “Do *not* start this, Leslie. If we’re playing the blame game then the ball is in *your* court. How the hell is Spoiler dead? You’re supposed to be a doctor!”

“She had a *bullet* shot *point-blank* through her chest,” Leslie snapped. “You’re lucky she didn’t die instantly. I did what I could.”

“Bullshit,” Dick said, baring his teeth. “You’ve saved people mowed over by machine guns, but *this* is where your expertise fails?”

“I am not a magic wand,” Leslie said. “There is only so much damage I can repair. If you didn’t want this to happen, you should never have made that young woman fight in your crusade.”

“Spoiler wasn’t *made* to do anything!” Dick shouted.

“Chum, not now,” Bruce said, putting a hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Leslie, if you will just let us see the body—”

“You don’t get to go *near* her—”

Leslie kept talking. She, Dick, and Bruce were starting to fight. Really fight. Tim stopped listening. The storm front was breaking. His hiccups smoothed out. His jaw clenched. The numbness solidified into crystal, and something rose in him that had never before been so awake.

He stepped away from Bruce, who was too busy acting as a shield between Tim and Leslie to notice. Two more steps back, then a third. He was halfway to the doors before the Dark Knight noticed.

“Robin,” Bruce said, and his anger was gone. He sounded spooked. “Robin, come here.”

Tim shook his head.

“Robin, it’s going to be okay,” Dick said, putting his hands up. “Just take a few steps forward.”

Tim didn’t.

“He killed her,” Tim whispered. “He killed my Spoy.”

It may not have been Black Mask’s hands, but it’d been on his orders. It hadn’t been about money or guns, he’d just wanted to hurt someone. *Tim’s* someone. And he had. Oh, how he had.

“Robin—” Bruce took a step forward.

Tim took another three back. He and Bruce stared at each other, two years of promises between them. Tim had always taken pains to follow the letter of Bruce’s laws, except for a few exceptions, but rules didn’t matter now. Restraint was yesterday’s problem. And, more importantly, Tim was closer to the door.

He spun and sprinted. Leslie shouted something in confusion, but Bruce didn’t waste time with words. He lunged for Tim, fingers brushing the hem of Robin’s cape, and barely missed.

Dick swore and yelled for him to stop, but Tim shouldered the door open and exited the clinic with preternatural speed.

His skin bubbled and shifted, scales sprouting along his arms as he stopped resisting what he was. His wings unfurled, and less than a second later Tim was in the air.

Gotham’s cityscape blossomed below him, more vibrant than poppy fields at noon. Not a cloud in the sky, but for once Tim didn’t need to hide.

A ghost of a memory tried to whisper to him—a conversation with Bruce in the Batcave years ago, a promise to play nice and behave for his sake—but it smoldered to ash. Thought vanished, rationality took a back seat, and Tim let the monster out.

Because that’s what he was; a monster. He never should have pretended otherwise. No matter how hard he tried to be human—to be *good*—it was doomed to fail. Tim Drake was just a mask he’d learned to wear, he never should have gotten fooled into thinking that he could have a happy life by ignoring what he really was.

There were no more tears to shed. The humanity within him withered; his rage was a banked coal that crawled up his chest through his throat. It was fire in a coal vein igniting into an inferno, and Tim let himself burn.

Chapter End Notes

Tim: My identity crisis is getting thrown into the garbage disposal, I literally don't have time for that. There is only rage.
Janet in the distance: That's my boy!

Inferno (1)

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for waiting a bit longer for this chapter, it's been pulling teeth to write. I'm honestly not completely happy with it, but if I have to edit it one more time, I'm walking into traffic. T-T

Anyway, this chapter is dedicated to every commenter who's said "Tim should get to do a murder as a treat!" Careful what you wish for. ;)

On that note, trigger/content warning for graphic violence and a very angry dragon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim's world was made of lines, tangled and ever-changing. Lines that were rules, lines that were limits, lines that dictated who he could be at any given time. His hands had always been entwined with Jack and Janet's, and each side of his blood pulled him toward a different parent. His inner dragon was louder, but Tim's human half was sneaky, and neither of them really understood the lines.

It was Jack and Janet who made sense of his world. They untangled the confusing business of living by teaching him how the lines worked. Jack helped him blend in with humans, and Janet reluctantly led by draconic example, both loving him with their whole hearts all the while. Later it was the Waynes who helped Tim maintain his balancing act, arms outstretched as he walked a tightrope between his conflicting instincts.

There was only one thing both sides of himself agreed on; his hoard was precious. Tim loved them with an intensity he couldn't name. It went beyond fondness and care. When they hurt, he hurt. It didn't matter how bad a price he had to pay to fix them, he'd do it, because their happiness was what created his.

Now, the lines were gone, burned up and scattered in tiny specks of ash. Tim flew on scarlet wings through clear, unfettered air, and screeched a shriek that cracked the glass of passing skyscrapers.

He recalled every family trip and tender hug; how his father had carried him through the house, telling him the stories of every picture frame and artifact until he fell asleep; of the days before preschool, always indoors because he still hadn't learned to shift human for too long; of Dad sitting with him on his sixteenth birthday, telling him being two things was a gift to treasure. With each sunny day with his hoard, Tim had started to believe it.

He beat his wings, flying faster, faster, a blur of red on a midnight palette. Jack's face fell through invisible fingers like sand at the seaside. The memories burned up like the lines, leaving Tim with nothing but smoke.

There was no room to be human. There wasn't even time for thought. Tim liked to pretend that dragons couldn't feel—that emotions were distasteful because he didn't have any—but that was a lie. If dragons loved with indescribable passion, then the same was true of their hate. It could not be quenched, and until his dying day Tim would hold onto his.

He let himself fall off the line he'd been walking as long as he could remember until all that was left was the dragon.

Tim didn't remember how it felt to fly across Gotham's bare sky, scales gleaming in the city lights. He didn't remember people poking their heads out of windows—then just as quickly ducking back inside—when his shadow passed over their homes. He didn't remember shadowed vigilantes running across roofs, trying to predict his movements and flag him down. Tim didn't even remember tracking down one, two, three rogue warehouses, blasting them with EMPs so whoever was inside couldn't call for help before diving inside.

He remembered the fire. The screams. How they weren't nearly loud enough. How Steph was still dead. How he had to move on and do it again, again, and again before whoever was chasing him caught up and made him stop.

He remembered sinking his claws into steel doors of the warehouses and ripping them off their hinges, screaming to the sea of gathered gangsters to give him Black Mask so Tim could tear him apart, laughter and cocked guns pointed his way, unhinging his jaw and screeching, twelve rows of teeth bared. He remembered making someone finally *talk* and learning that Black Mask was down at the docks, holed up in a remodeled factory that was more metal than concrete, and more rust than metal.

He remembered smiling.

***

Roman Sionis wasn't clever. Smart, sure, but not clever. Everything he owned—his warehouses, his office, his business—were only dangerous because they were numerous. They weren't well hidden. They weren't *dragon proof.*

Even so, when Tim reached the old, unremarkable warehouse down at the docks, he forced himself to pause.

Tim could've burst in through the windows, teeth bared and claws out, but that wasn't good enough. He didn't just want the rogue dead. That was too merciful a fate for someone Tim hated—truly hated, beyond the capacity to consider forgiveness.

He had to be thorough.

If he'd had time, he could've made a better plan. A sleek, foolproof one that would never have linked his actions back to him. But Tim had only worked that hard with the Joker because he hadn't wanted to worry Bruce's morals. That wasn't a concern now.

He locked all the doors from the outside, then crawled in through an upper window. Balanced in the sill, Tim detached an emergency EMP from his belt, the last of the packet the Bats kept in reserve at all times. It would block everything—radio, phones, Internet, electricity. Calling for help would be impossible, which made Tim want to purr. That was the first key to successful hunting; remove any chance of survival before it began, then play.

Tim wasn't playing now.

He stood human-shaped on a rafter, breathing heavily as he looked down at the people below. A couple dozen men in suit coats were spread across the large, open floor, some at card tables while others smoked near crates of smuggled weaponry. He knew their faces. Recognized them from over two years of putting people in prison. Black Mask's men, ranging from common thugs to a few right hands. The man himself sat at a card table, his skeletonic mask twisted in an earsplitting grin as he played poker with the man who had shot Steph.

Tim's ears rung. They were playing cards and *laughing.*

"You're telling tall tales, Vanni," Black Mask said as a new hand was dealt. "Pull the other one."

“I swear it on my mother’s grave,” Vanni, Steph’s killer, said. “Batman’s third Robin’s not a bird at all. The Dark Knight’s got a pet monster in tights!”

Everyone laughed. Someone even giggled. Black Mask rearranged his cards, chewing on a cigarette. He nodded toward one of the men behind him and asked why the crew in East End hadn’t checked in yet. The thug shrugged and said he’d get on it.

“What is the kid then, a werewolf?” A third card player asked, throwing a chip into the pot.

“Better,” Vanni said, tapping his fingers against the table like a gunshot. “A Dragon. Some kind of oriental one, I don’t know. It looked *expensive.”*

Several people rolled their eyes, but Black Mask leaned forward, sliding his own wager into the center of the table. His hands were gloved, but Tim was sure they smelled like blood.

“First you tell me you heard Batman’s first name,” the mob boss said. “Now you’re telling me the man is working with a meta. Fantastical stories are only interesting when they don’t give me hope for future business, Vanni. Aren’t I right, Kevin?”

The final poker player looked up. He had the unassuming blandness of someone doomed to live in the background of their own life, but Tim vaguely recalled his face. He knew Kevin from somewhere.

“Right, boss,” Kevin said, swapping out one of his own cards.

“Who says that thing’s a meta?” Vanni scoffed. “I’ll bet you a hundred it’s the real deal. Picture it, boss, a shape-shifting dragon. That’s rarer than rare. A *lot* of folk would like that. It ain’t fair Batman gets a shiny pet like that all to himself. I know some big businessmen that’d pay a fortune to put a thing like that in their collections. We just gotta figure out how to contain it.”

Vanni threw another handful of chips into the poker pot. They clattered like pearls against concrete.

“Either you’re a bad liar or a genius,” Black Mask said. He bit down on his cigarette. “There’s money there, *if* we choose to sell.”

Tim heard the words, but they didn’t mean anything. They were just sounds coming from a dead man. Tim looked at the warehouse floor, cataloging the layout; munitions storage. Firearms, grenades, ammo. Gas pipes and an exposed water heater. Rafters upon rafters, perfect for grapples. Heavy machines coated in rust and left to rot. Two sets of doors, a front and back that Tim had already sealed. A dozen chairs and forty people. All of them armed.

“Boss, I don’t know,” Kevin said, thumbing his cards. “Taking Robin, that’s dangerous. He’s protected by the Bats, and I hear Red Hood is fond of him too.”

It clicked, finally. That was *Kevin* Kevin, Jason’s double-agent.

Black Mask matched Vanni’s bet. “That’s what they said about the blond one.”

Tim tensed. Horns began to grow, peaking through his hair, and his mouth pooled with venom.

“Sounds like we nabbed the wrong Robin,” the third player said. “All that work getting the Bats separated, and we didn’t even get the interesting sidekick. Should’ve gone for the boy. I’ve always thought he was *pretty.”*

“Fold,” Kevin said, standing as he threw his cards onto the table. “I’m going to get some air.”

He started heading for the doors. He wouldn’t get far.

The remaining players revealed their hands. A bluff, a straight, and a royal flush that was all hearts.

“Oh I wouldn’t say it was a complete waste. I got the Bat’s first name—I’ll give that to you soon, boss—and had a lot of fun,” Vanni said as he, the winner, reached for the pot. His face split into a grin. “You should’ve heard that girl *sing.”*

The batarang slashed him across the mouth and went through his cheek.

Vanni fell, clutching his face with a howl as he fell to the floor. The batarang glinted from where it'd impaled itself into the concrete beside him. People swore, chairs scraping as they got up from the table, instinctively looking up, following its trajectory.

Tim stood in the rafters, uniform in tatters. The Robin cape was charred and ashen. There was more red on him than any other color, and it had dried in spatters. A growl built in his throat as his hand —holding his last batarang—warped into claws.

"Still think he's cute?" Black Mask said, eyes fixed on Tim's half-formed horns. He didn't look scared so much as *fascinated.*

Kevin—*Jason's* Kevin—stared at Tim with eyes wider than chicken eggs, and took several steps back until he was pressed against the sealed exit.

Tim didn't say anything. Now was not a time for quips. He was falling into the mad again, like he had at the other warehouses when he hadn't been able to find Vanni or Black Mask. There was a time for thinking and patience, but Tim was past that.

"Why don't you come down from there, Birdy, and we can talk. You're biting off more than you can chew, taking us alone," Black Mask said. "Might as well make it easier on yourself."

There were guns trained on Tim, at least one to each gangster. His scales weren't bullet proof. This was close range. Engaging would be stupid.

"That'sss what your last warehouse sssaid," Tim said.

Done waiting, Tim peeled back his lips to reveal rows and rows of jagged, sharp teeth, and screamed as loud as he could. A window shattered, and several man dropped their guns to clutch their ears.

Tim used their distraction to throw his last batarang. It hit a gas pipe and pierced it open. Noxious fills started filling the room, and Tim let more of himself shift. Bones bent, skin melted into scales, and he hoped it was the most horrifying thing they'd ever seen.

He leapt toward Black Mask, not bothering to form his wings, and let fire spark from his throat.

It ignited with the gas and lit the whole building up in an inferno.

***

The haze of violence was thicker than smog. Tim didn't bother seeing through it. When something hard smashed into him, punching a hole in his scales, he ignored it. When a bullet tore through his arm, he didn't feel it. He *was* the fog, the rage, the consuming hate. They'd hurt what was his, so he'd return it tenfold on them.

In the back of his mind, he heard his father telling him that he was better than this. There were memories of the two of them in the family garden, with Jack patiently teaching him how to identify flowers. *"You need to be gentle too, Timmy. You don't have to just be strong."*

Tim slashed his claws across a man's face, raking through their eyes. His father's voice was buried under the crushing void where Steph was supposed to be.

He was relentless. A blood-red dart that bit, clawed, and burned whatever it touched. What he couldn't slash he strangled. What wasn't singed was poisoned. When somebody found the exit, he was there to make sure they never took it. Fire haloed the warehouse like an angel's coat, as wrathful as an angry god.

"Fuck, *fuck,"* someone yelled. "I thought Bats didn't kill!"

It was Vanni, frantically loading a handgun. Tim swiped it away using his tail, the barbs ripping through the man's hand, and lunged at him. Vanni swore, trying to push Tim's jaws away, then screamed as venom corroded his hands and dripped onto his face. Tim snapped his jaws closed around the man's head so hard three of his fangs shattered. Vanni didn't move again. The venom continued to eat through the concrete beneath his corpse.

The roof groaned, rusted rafters buckling under the heat as flamed climbed the walls. The smoke could only escape out of a few windows, so the entire building was cloyed with the smell of burning flesh and gas. Heavy bangs echoed from where several of the thugs were trying to force open one of the doors. He growled; not on Tim's watch.

A man grabbed a Tommy gun from the crates of weaponry and rat-tat-tated it across the warehouse. Tim shifted faster than thought into a smaller target and rolled beneath the card table, eyes on the grenades in the corner. Those packed a punch. If he could get hold of a few—

He yelped as his hair was pulled and he was thrown onto the ground. An Armani-clad shoe stomped in his injured arm and snapped the bone. Tim gasped, air punched out of him, but there was no pain yet.

"You fucking freak," Black Mask said, keeping Tim pinned with a foot on his now-broken arm. The mob boss had a butterfly knife in one hand. "Do you have any idea how much money you're burning!? I'm going to make you *match* that blond girl."

The butterfly knife plunged down. Tim contorted, letting it clip his ear since it got the rogue in biting range. Only an idiot attempted close quarters combat with a dragon, but Black Mask wasn't clever. Smart, maybe, not even by that much.

Tim didn't bother shifting completely back into his dragon form. His teeth sank into Black Mask's jugular and *gnawed.* The fires continued to climb, the smoke grew thicker. People coughed and dropped to the ground, hands around their throats.

Black Mask's beady, bloodshot eye met with Tim's, and the rogue used his last moments alive to shove the butterfly knife into Tim's leg, barely missing the artery, before coughing blood and going limp.

Tim didn't loosen his jaws until he knew the man was dead, then rolled the body off him and gasped for air. He felt . . . There wasn't pain yet. His body and brain weren't on speaking terms, but his heart rate picked up and got faster, faster, faster.

A catwalk creaked overhead, held together by two rusty screws. Tim got to his hands and knees, staring dumbly as his limbs bumbled between scales and skin. He . . . He to do something. Black

Mask was dead, but Steph was still *gone* so Tim couldn't be done. That wasn't how this worked. He needed, needed—

A bang. A creak. A glance.

Tim met Kevin's eyes as the half-dozen survivors tried to force open an exit, and everything made sense again.

He just hadn't hurt other people *enough.*

Tim fell back into his dragon body, letting bones and skins cobble into their proper once more. His head spun from blood loss and his injuries started to throb, but he didn't look away from the bad humans. A growl reverberated through the warehouse. He was going to enjoy this.

Another bang, followed by several shots. The smoke began to clear as the door on the opposite side was ripped open. A hazy figure stood obscured by the smoke. The humans would have trouble making out their details, but Tim recognized that helmet anywhere.

"Jesus Christ," Red Hood said, gun smoking where he'd blown the lock off the door. *"Rob."*

Why was Jason here? It was too dangerous, he needed to go home—back to Tim's nest where he could keep him safe. Gotham was too dangerous for hoard to be out and about. Tim had to keep them away from it until the city was cleaned with fire and every bad thing was ash.

"Hey, Robbie, calm down," Jason said, stepping slowly inside. He holstered his gun and raised both hands. "It's just me."

"Boss, no!" Kevin said. "Don't get closer!"

Tim hissed, turned back toward his prey. They were the only ones left. Six of seven people who needed to die, and then—then Tim wasn't sure what he'd do, but it'd be *something.*

“Shut up, Kev,” Jason said. “Robin. *Robin,* look at me. It’s alright. I’m here.”

Yeah, that was the *problem.* Jason was less than a hundred feet away from the people who’d killed Steph. Tim needed to act fast so he didn’t lost another human.

“Come on, easy,” Jason said, stepping over mangled remains of Vanni. “I got you.”

He reached out as if he were to pet Tim’s snout. The anger started to uncoil. Tim’s limbs began to shake. Jason was good. He was safe. He’d come *back.* Tim let Jason put a hand on his flank. Dragons didn’t cry, but Tim wanted to.

“See, we’re okay,” Jason said. “Just you and me. Come on, let’s get you home.”

Home?

Home was days on the couch, cuddling with Dick and Babs. Hours perched on a chair in the Batcave with Bruce while cold cases flashed by on the screens. Helping Alfred in the kitchen, calling Mom and Dad, texting his friends and ranking waffles with Steph. Home was the only place Tim belonged, but—

—but Mom and Dad were gone, Bart and Kon were dead, and now Steph was too. Was it even home anymore?

“Robin!”

Tim jerked away from Jason to stare at the ceiling.

There, in the skylight; Batman, more shadow than person, staring at Tim like he didn’t recognize him. Like Tim was a *monster.*

Suddenly, it didn’t matter that Jason was back, that Bruce was here, that Black Mask was dead. Tim’s world was made of lines, and he’d walked over all of them. Why *wouldn’t* his hoard look at

him like that?

Smoke escaped through his nostrils as Tim bared his teeth. His human half wanted comfort, but there wasn't any to be had. It was a useless, pathetic waste of DNA. Listening to it was a mistake Tim wouldn't make again.

"Robin, calm down," Hood said, moving to touch Tim again. "Just take a—"

Tim lashed his tail and hit Jason across the chest. The helmet echoed an aborted, staticky gasp as the Red Hood was flung against the opposite wall. Jason crumpled against the ground with a loud swear as Batman barked something from above. Tim was already moving.

The thugs had quieted when Hood arrived, but now they scattered. Tim grabbed one in his jaws, shaking his head back and forth before tossing them to the ground. It wasn't a deep wound, but it didn't matter. Tim had used his venom. It'd be fatal. The rest of Black Mask's men were sprinting toward the far door, toward freedom.

Hell no. Tim wasn't done with them.

He coiled to spring forward, then screeched as a couple hundred pounds of vigilante fell on him. Batman had grappled from the skylight, and was now wrapping his arms around the back of Tim's head, trying to lock it into place. It was a maneuver crocodiles hunters used. Cass had it mastered, but Bruce was trying to be gentle. Big mistake.

Tim writhed and unfurled his wings, bucking Batman off by slamming him into one of the rusty factory machines, then jumped into the air. The warehouse was too small to maneuver well, but Tim wasn't trying to fly. He hooked his claws around the crumbling catwalk and *yanked,* letting his weight rip it from the ceiling. It crashed onto the floor and two unlucky thugs. Tim would come back to maul them later, after he'd taken care of the rest.

A cable wrapped around his legs, followed by another. Tim hissed as Batman and Red Hood used their grapples to try and net him, binding him one limb at a time until they'd eventually get his wings restrained. It was one of their contingencies for him. Bruce had said he had plenty, just in case Hatter or Crane or someone got to Tim. It didn't take a genius to figure out those same plans could be used against Tim *whenever.*

But Tim had contingencies too.

He snapped back to his smaller human form and felt the grapple lines loosen around suddenly-smaller limbs, then fall away as he hit the ground again (landing on his good leg, barely) and ran on all fours to the door, limbs already stretching back into their more lethal variety. Another grapple shot out, tangling around his neck. Tim clamped his teeth around the wire and melted it with his venom, barely phased.

"Shit!" Kevin yelled, ducking the swipe of Tim's claws. They hit the guy in front of him, gouging several inches deep in the back. "*Boss!"*

Several things happened at once. Tim tried to decapitate Kevin. Batman tackled Kevin to save him, and Red Hood tackled Tim. A van screeched to a halt by the exit, tires smoking as it collided with a telephone pole, and three surviving Black Mask members successfully escaped, vanishing into the alleys around the docks.

"Kevin, run!" Jason yelled.

Kevin did, sprinting like he was auditioning to become a speedster.

Tim screamed, kicking out and writhing as he flapped his wings to try and shake Jason off. His zombie human was as heavy as Bruce, but Tim could do it. He needed to *get out,* he had to find the rest of Black Mask's men *now* because it didn't matter who they were, they'd killed *Steph* and *had* to die, even if they were Jason's favorites, because that was fair and Tim was *hurting*—

"Sorry, kiddo," Jason grunted. "I really didn't want to do this."

The bat symbol on his chest lit up, thrumming with electricity, and hit Tim will several thousand watts of lightning.

***

Tim's world was made of lines. Painstakingly, lovingly drawn around him by his parents. Lines about how to love. How to care for others. How to stay safe in a world that would eat him alive. Tim didn't understand the lines very well, but he loved them. No matter how inconvenient they could be, he knew why they were there.

"Timmy, Timmy, *please,"* someone said, "just stop. It's okay, I promise. Tim."

He continued to thrash. Everything hurt. He was burning from the inside and moving was so hard. People were pinning him down. He tried to shift to a smaller shape and slip away, but they kept hold of him, and then there were manacles on his hands that bit into his skin, and if he got bigger again they'd *cut.* Tim didn't want to lose his hands, he needed them. He couldn't hold his hoard's hands without them.

Hands, more hands. On his face, cupping his cheek. Gentle, warm, smelling like the Clocktower. Tim opened his eyes, meeting Nightwing's. Dick's hair was singed, his uniform all wrong. A large bruise had formed on his face and he was favoring one side.

"D-Di—" Tim hiccuped, but couldn't finish the word.

Everything hurt. His body burned. He was coated in ash and dried blood. He'd tried so hard. He'd killed Black Mask, he'd found Steph's killer. He'd done everything he was supposed to do, so why hadn't it *fixed* anything?

Why did he have to keep losing people?

"Timmy, listen, I need you to listen." Dick said, emotions bleeding into his voice that made it sound like he'd been electrocuted too. "Leslie lied."

Bruce and Jason were the ones keeping him pinned, each gasping for breath like it was harder than fighting Killer Croc. Tim stopped writhing though. Couldn't think past his confusion.

"What?" He whispered.

“Leslie lied,” Dick said, lips trembling. “Steph’s alive. She—she’s okay, Tim. She flat-lined for a moment, but the surgery was successful.”

No. No, that couldn’t be true. This had to be a lie. A contingency against Tim. A mean, *cruel* way to calm him down and make him stop.

But Dick shifted, pointing toward the van. The side door had been flung open. The inside was kitted out as a makeshift ambulance. Strapped to a gurney and a half-dozen IVs, was a girl with blond hair and too many bandages.

Even through the smoke and the pain, he’d recognize her scent anywhere.

“Spoy?” Tim croaked.

“She’s okay,” Dick said, raw. “We—we couldn’t find you, so I stayed at the clinic in case you came back, and I found—”

Tim couldn’t hear very well. His ears kept ringing instead of doing their job. He just couldn’t understand. Leslie Thompkins was supposed to be a good human. She kept Batman stitched together. She’d helped Tim with his teeth last year. She liked to tell people she would never do someone harm. How did—how was *this* no harm?

“Steph’s hurt badly, Tim,” Dick said, “but she’s alive. I promise. We’re going to help her. Please, please let us help you too.”

Hurt, injured, it didn’t matter what happened to Tim. But Steph—she had needed his help and he hadn’t been there. He’d run off, lost control. Been so angry he hadn’t even made sure she was really dead. Leslie had lied and he’d just believed it.

Some dragon. Some protector. He’d thought he’d done something right, but he’d messed up again. People were dead, the surviving Black Mask members knew his secret, and every one of Bruce’s rules was broken. He was sure that if he looked at his humans’ faces, they’d be disappointed.

Tears burned his eyes. Dragons didn’t cry, but Tim did. He crumpled against the floor of a smoldering warehouse, held down by the Red Hood and Batman, and sobbed between heartbroken screams.

His world was made of lines. What was he supposed to do when other people were the ones who broke them?

Chapter End Notes

Did Dick steal a van and kidnap a critically injured patient after discovering Leslie was planning to ship Spoy Spoy off to Africa? Yes, yes he did, knowing full well that the only way to actually get Tim to stop was for the kid to see Steph alive with his own eyes.

Not featured this chapter is Bruce running around Gotham like a demon, trying to keep up with Tim *literally the fasted dragon subtype to exist* Drake's massacre of every Black Mask associate he could sink his teeth into, as well as Jason's mad dash to track down the right warehouse and save Kevin from dying a grisly death. (This has definitely earned Jason a life-time Best Boss status from his employees).

Next time: recovery, reveals, and fallout.

Hopital (-)

Chapter Summary

Tim gets his hoard's attention, and something far worse . . . medical attention.

Chapter Notes

Writing this chapter be like: Wow, Tim is NOT going to let anybody close enough to help with those serious injuries. Hmmmm. Disassociation it is!

Also, an update: Since Ao3 was scraped by bots (again) I've finally bit the bullet an privatized all my fics. Sorry to any guest readers, I'm just really sick of having to worry about my stories being shoved into the AI meat grinder. :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim wanted to kill Leslie Thompkins. There weren't many ways to wound a soul, but betrayal at the hands of someone he thought was safe hurt more than the bullet in his arm. She'd lied and hurt him and betrayed the trust he never should have put in her. He wanted her to *suffer.*

But he couldn't hunt her down, because Steph was hurt and Bruce was scaring him.

It was Tim, Steph, and Dick in the back of the van while Bruce drove. Jason had stayed behind to "clean up," and Tim had only let him go because Dick said something about getting a sedative. He was still trembling, thinking about that. Being put to sleep, in a state where he couldn't do *anything* to protect his humans, made breathing hard and thinking harder.

So Jason was gone, and the van was en route to the hospital.

Steph lay on her cot, unmoving and far too still. Tim had been so panicked when he'd caught her falling from the building that he hadn't registered her other injuries, but she'd been tortured for half an hour, and each minute was imprinted on her skin. He curled next to her, his hand clasped around her wrist, careful not to move any of the wires or tubes attached to her. Her pulse was stronger than before and her skin warmer, but she was still too cold. Like a corpse.

A warm hand squeezed his shoulder.

“Timmy? Buddy?” Dick said. “Talk to me? Please?”

Tim tucked his head and didn’t answer. If he looked up, he would have to face the disappointment that was surely in his humans’ eyes. Dick was acting sweet, but Tim knew he was looking at him with pity. Even so, pity was better than Bruce.

“Tim, Tim please look at me,” Dick said. “We need to bandage your leg.”

Tim shook his head. Let him bleed out. It didn’t matter. Nothing did except Steph, because if he thought of anything else he would lose it again and Bruce would be *angrier*.

“Tim, please,” Dick said. “Just let us help.”

He flinched. “I—I—”

The van jerked as it drove over potholes and curbs as Batman floored it to the hospital, silent save the tension in his shoulders that’d make Atlas look relaxed.

“I’m sorry,” Tim said, unsure who he was speaking to.

He stretched his leg out, staring dumbly at the mangled stab-wound on his thigh, and refused to talk for the rest of the drive.

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At Gotham General, Tim screamed bloody murder when the nurses tried to take him away from Steph for his own treatment. Dick had to grab him before Tim slashed a well-meaning nurse across

the face, and got a headbutt for his trouble. Tim was ready to bite him too, but Bruce—now dressed in civilian clothes—pinned him with a look he couldn't untangle.

"Tim, behave," Bruce said. "Dick will look after Steph. It won't be long."

Tim clung to Dick's arm, catching his breath. His ears rang and spots danced in his eyes. Scales tried to sprout on his arm and he had to bite his cheeks with too-sharp teeth to stop. The last time he'd left Steph with a doctor, he thought she'd died. He *couldn't* leave her. What if it happened again? What if there were other Leslie's in Gotham General that'd take Spoy away?

But Bruce was giving him that look, and Tim couldn't breathe.

"*You are to stay out of combat. If anyone is maimed or severely injured, you're done for good. Understand?"*

The memory was harsh, a grating voice scraping Tim's skin with recrimination. Done for good, that's what Bruce had said, and

Done for good.

That'd just been for hurting people, not killing them.

Tim cried silently as his arm was set and Steph was taken to ER. The bullet was removed and his wounds were stitched together with medical thread, putting him back together piece by piece. They'd start to heal soon, but the scars would remain. Unless Bruce called Jack's surgeon and found a way to erase those too.

***

Steph's room was cold white walls and metal beeps. Tim hated it. Nothing good happened in hospitals, and beneath the sterile sheen of bleach and medicine was the scent of suffering.

He balled his fists against his knees, staring at Steph's pale face. She had an oxygen mask on. The heart rate monitor beeped steadily in the corner, keeping track of all her vitals. Tim didn't trust it. He didn't trust anything.

Tim scooted his plastic chair closer to the bed rested his head on the mattress. It'd taken nearly an hour in ER before he was cleared to visit her. Tim didn't know if that was fast or slow, only that it had felt like an eternity. His saving grace was that now that the adrenaline was leaving him it was getting harder to focus. Everything swam in and out of fog, and Tim was too tired to fight it. It didn't matter if he could think as long as he was with Steph.

He wanted to lay beside her, covering both their bodies with a wing to block out the world and keep her safe. But he couldn't do that in public. He ruined his cover as Robin, but Tim Drake was still officially a human and that *meant* something. So he stayed on the chair, breathing the smell of bleach and medicine, and felt her pulse through his fingertips.

Eventually, the door to her private room opened softly. Bruce stepped in, followed by Dick. They looked almost as bad as Tim felt—civilian clothes thrown on, hair mussed, the scent of ash and blood hanging over them. Dick had a brace on his wrist, and Bruce was careful not to jostle his left side.

Tim's stomach churned. The injuries were his fault. Dick had almost had his hand bitten off, and Bruce and Jason had been thrashed trying to pin him down. Their bodies were probably more bruises than skin.

He'd done that.

He'd hurt his hoard.

Tim wanted to scream, except that would wake up Steph.

"Hey, Timmy," Dick said, kneeling by the chair. "Just talked to the doctor. Steph's going to be fine. Crystal is on her way. Once she's here, we'll talk about proper care for Steph, alright?"

It took several seconds for his brain to scrape together its speaking skills.

“Right,” Tim said. He sounded like he’d been chewing glass.

“Crystal can’t take her, okay?” Tim said, squeezing Steph’s wrist tighter. “I don’t want her to be gone.”

Yesterday, Steph had been sending him cat memes and making him laugh. They had plans to go to Waffle House and test the kitchen for asbestos. It’d been so *normal.* He had to keep her right here where he could watch her or—

The heart rate monitor beeped again, harsh and robotic. Tim curled closer to Spoy, wishing she’d open her eyes and say something—anything—instead of just lying there like a corpse.

“Steph is going to be in the hospital for a while,” Dick said gently. “She’s not going anywhere.”

She almost did, forever.

Sometimes, Tim forgot how dangerous their lives were. That despite his abilities and protectiveness, all it took was a lucky bullet for his most important treasures to be lost forever.

He should have killed more of Black Mask’s goons. He should have burned the whole city down just to show what would happen when he was tested. Gotham was his to protect and destroy, and Tim was happy to turn it into ash to get the point across.

Bruce put a hand on Tim’s back and didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. Tim could read B better than anyone. He wasn’t talking because he was mad. Madder than mad. At Tim.

Bruce started to rub big, gentle circles into Tim’s back, like he had when Jack had been in the hospital. Tim’s breath hitched. He’d rather Bruce yelled and screamed at him. Tim didn’t want pretend comfort. It was another lie. It had to be, because Bruce hadn’t said anything in so long and his jaw was so tight his teeth would probably crack and he had *rules* that were scattered in pieces on Gotham’s streets because Tim couldn’t do his damn job and control himself.

He hiccuped, bringing a hand to his cheek, feeling a phantom sting where Cassie had slapped him. Janet had always said humans were silly and ignorable. If they didn't like something that was *their* problem, but Cassie had *left.* She didn't even want to *look* at him, and Tim wanted his hoard to love him. But Bruce had so many rules, so many *lines.* He would throw Tim away too.

"You're not doing too hot, kiddo," Dick said, taking Tim's spare hand in his own. "The nurses said you lost a lot of blood. You should get some rest. We'll watch Steph while you sleep."

Tim shook his head. He didn't know how to tell his hoard that he wouldn't sleep ever again. Not unless he knew his humans were safe, and even then, maybe not. Because there was a chance that when he woke up, none of them would be there.

They'd leave him, just like everybody else.

***

Bruce worked out a care routine with Crystal.

As a single-mom working full-time, Steph's mom needed help. The Browns' health insurance was a joke, their apartment's elevator was broken (making it inaccessible for the wheelchair and crutches Steph would need during recovery), and there was only so much time off Crystal was given for family emergencies.

Bruce's offer to let Steph recover at the manor, which was equipped with physical therapy equipment and a live-in caretaker, was a lifeline Crystal Brown couldn't refuse.

"I'm sure Steph will feel better with some familiar faces nearby too," Dick said, landing the killing blow. "Staying in the medical ward for her entire recovery isn't the most comfortable way to heal."

"Yes, that's true," Crystal said, looking a stiff breeze away from having a breakdown. "I'm sure she would love that."

The details were mostly logistics. How long Steph would be there before going back home, what PT routines needed to happen, and so on. Tim didn't listen to the adults hash them out. The fog was still really thick in his brain. If he untensed, he'd probably collapse.

"I'm just so grateful you were there," Crystal told Tim eventually, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "If Steph hadn't been with you . . ."

Steph had been *adamant* nobody told her mom about Spoiler or Robin, no matter how severe the injury, and Bruce had respected her wishes. Tim had asked about it once, and Bruce had said it was something for the Browns to discuss between themselves; so, the cover was that Tim and Steph had been caught in a shootout in Crime Alley on one of their late night waffle runs. Wrong place, wrong time. A clean, simple explanation for how they'd been brutalized.

Tim stared at Crystal without responding. He could only imagine what he looked like to her—a mass of cuts and bruises held together with bandages and medical tape. A weak, pathetic teenager, not a vigilante or a monster. Crystal looked at him like he wasn't dangerous. Like he was *good.*

"You really don't have to do this," Crystal said, turning to Bruce when it was clear Tim wouldn't respond. "I can't repay you—"

"Steph is a close family friend," Bruce said firmly. "Repayment isn't necessary. We just want her to get the rest she needs."

Tim had a feeling Steph's hospital bills would be paid by an anonymous donor, and Crystal's salary increased as well.

Crystal thanked Bruce profusely, then sat at Steph's bedside too, sniffling into a tissue. She and Tim huddled around the cot and its too-thin sheets, and it was quiet save for the beeps of the heart monitor.

After half an hour, Bruce said it was time to go.

"I'm not leaving her!" Tim said, about to scream and throw things. "Stop making me go, I don't *want* to!"

Why didn't they *listen?* Why couldn't Tim just have this one thing?

"We'll be in the hall. Just give them a moment," Bruce said, almost gently. "Just a few. I promise, we aren't leaving."

Tim turned to Crystal and saw the woman fighting back tears as she stared at her daughter. He was hit, suddenly, by the memory of Janet crying in Jack's hospital room, and felt the fight drain of out him. Steph didn't talk about her relationship with Crystal much. Tim knew there were hard feelings about various things between them—such as Cluemaster, and Crystal's on and off drug addiction—but he was sure Steph would feel better to have her mom close when she was injured.

It was a luxury Tim had never had.

"'Kay," He said. "Let's go. Just for a bit."

His instincts screamed at him as he was led out the door. Tim tried to squash them, but all that did was make his teeth sharpen, eager to come back out.

***

"Where's Dick?" Tim asked once he and Bruce were in the hall. Tim had refused to move away from the door to Steph's room, and curled instead on the floor by the wall.

One moment, Dick had been there, helping talk to Crystal. The next, he'd *disappeared.* Tim couldn't even remember if he'd said goodbye.

Bruce sat on the floor next to him. "He's helping clean up. Gordon is investigating the fires. Jason's . . . efforts, have been directed elsewhere."

That meant nothing to Tim. Two of his hoard members *weren't here*, and the rest were scattered across the city. Who cared about Gordon and "clean up?" They needed to come back. That was the

only way he'd know they were okay.

"Dick will be back soon, and Jason is already on his way," Bruce continued, moving to wrap and arm around his shoulders. "I've got you until then."

Tim flinched.

Bruce froze.

"Champ?" Bruce said softly.

Tim buried his face in his arms. Stupid, *stupid.* He kept remembering how Bruce had looked at him in the warehouse. With the Joker, Tim had been able to hide what he'd done to protect Bruce's morals, but that hadn't been an option this time. Bruce saw him kill people, and Bruce *hated* death. He probably hated Tim too.

"I'm sorry," Tim said, voice so small he barely recognized it. "Don't—"

Don't throw him away. Don't make him leave. Don't yell, don't get angry. Don't look at him like that.

Bruce set his arm down and took a deep breath. "Okay, I won't."

There was too much space between him and Tim. Normally, it'd be easy to breach it, cuddling against his favorite human and nosing against his chest, listening to the comforting beat of his heart. Now, nothing seemed scarier.

Jack would never throw him away. Jack loved Tim more than rules; family was everything to him. But Jack wasn't here, and Tim wasn't sure about Bruce anymore. He loved Tim, but could he love a monster?

Tim curled into a tighter ball, pretending he couldn't feel the Dark Knight's eyes on him. Crystal cried in the background, her tears the softest rain.

"Champ," Bruce said, softer than soft. "Can you look at me?"

"No," Tim said. He hid his hands so nobody would see the sharp, tapered claws trying to form where harmless fingernails were meant to be. "Bad idea."

"I promise, it's not," Bruce said. "I can't help if I don't know what you're thinking."

Help. Bruce wanted to help?

"Liar! Y-You hate me," Tim said. "I didn't do a good job. I should've been better. I broke your rules, and now—"

And now Tim might have an even smaller hoard, because although dragons didn't *need* their humans to like them, Tim wanted his to. If they didn't want him around, where was Tim supposed to go? He couldn't stay with Jack and Janet. Young Justice was over and Cassie *hated* him. Jason would keep him, but would Bruce let a dragon stay in Gotham now? Would he make Tim leave?

Just when he thought he'd pieced himself together, another sledgehammer shattered the porcelain vase that was his heart. There hadn't even been time for the glue to dry.

"Shh, no, champ, that's not what's happening," Bruce said. "Look at me. *Tim."*

His bleary, bloodshot eyes cracked open, slitted inhumanly in Tim's panic. He blinked to correct them, but it was so *hard*. After a moment, they slipped up again, reptilian once more. Yet another thing he couldn't do right.

Bruce slowly opened his arms in an invitation. Tim hesitated, but teetered closer. Bruce pulled him close, keeping his grip light and escapable. Tim was stiff in the embrace, too scared to move. He didn't understand how Bruce could stand to touch him, but he didn't want it to end.

"Why is Jason always made at me?" Bruce asked.

Tim blinked. "Huh?"

"Why, Tim?" Bruce said.

Tim cleared his throat. It was a long list, but Bruce wouldn't bring this up if it was about their different music tastes. It'd be something bigger.

"You don't kill," Tim said, small. "You hate murderers."

He and Jason had a weird cease-fire that was a stable as their mental health, but Bruce was strict even then. Unbending in his beliefs. He was angry at Tim—he had to be—because Tim hadn't just killed someone, he'd slaughtered dozens.

Tim's shoulders shook. He could still taste metal and ash.

"Not murderers," Bruce said, keeping Tim pressed against his chest. "Death. Do you know why?"

Tim shook his head. Every conversation they'd ever had about this was out of reach.

"To kill someone is to believe they have no redemption," Bruce said. "No second chances, no room for making things right. It is an easy way to pass judgment on another person's life. I—I cannot stand that. Maybe not everyone can or wants to change, but who am I to make that decision for them? There is no metric for what makes a human 'good' enough to earn the right to live."

Tim gulped. While he agreed on principle it never seemed to work in practice. Black Mask had been evil. The Joker had been evil. Tim felt no regret for their deaths.

But he'd killed so many others. So, so many. That was what dragons were supposed to do. His hoard was hurt, he had to eliminate the threat. It was supposed to be a *good thing,* but Tim had stopped caring who he hurt in the end. He'd even hurt Jason. He'd been out of control.

"You're going to make me leave," Tim croaked. He was too dangerous to keep. "You're—B, I *tried*, I promise I—"

A hand pressed against the back of his head. Bruce rocked him, making shushing sounds in Tim's ear. His human was warm and solid and painfully gentle.

"No, Tim, that's not what I meant," Bruce said, raw, like he'd been punched. "Second chances. I give *everyone* second chances, even those who don't deserve them. I'm not deluded into thinking it will always work, but I still do it."

He nudged Tim's chin, forcing him to meet his eyes again. Bruce's expression was tear-stained, but Tim couldn't tell which of them had been crying.

"I give my worst enemies second chances, knowing they will hurt me," Bruce said. "If you believe that I would throw you away and condemn you for *this*, then I have failed you more than I realized."

Tim shook his head and made a protesting sound. Bruce wasn't having it.

"I have," Bruce said, quieter. "You always try so hard for us, even when it's killing you. I should be doing more for you."

Doing what, Tim wanted to ask. The Waynes gave him everything he could ask for already. Their company, their time, their affection, their love. Tim couldn't imagine wanting more when he already had so much. He hoarded what was dear to him, but he rarely quibbled over his treasures' imperfections. Even when he disagreed with the Waynes, that was just another facet of who they were, and that was fine with him.

"I *am* upset, but not at you," Bruce said. "I'm angry at Black Mask and *furious* at Leslie, but more than anything I'm disgusted at myself. But these are my feelings to work through, Tim. I won't let them stop me from helping you. You're hurting, and I will not leave you to weather it alone."

Tim's head swam. He felt nauseous from post-adrenaline and emotions. His eyes and nerves were wrung out sponges, aching from too many tears. But if he was hearing this correctly, if he got this right, then...

"You'll keep me?" Tim whispered with a frailness that hurt.

"I'm never letting you go," Bruce said.

“But I broke the rules,” Tim said. “All of them… except the cannibalism one, but that’s only because you guys stopped me before I could get to that point.”

He’d had plans for the bodies. The bone shrines would’ve looked like kiddie craft projects compared to the statement piece he’d wanted to make.

“I almost lost you,” Bruce whispered. “What are rules compared to that?”

Tim returned the hug with inhuman strength. An ugly, throaty sob escaped him. Bruce didn’t wince, even as Tim’s claws dug into his skin.

“You promise?” Tim sniffled.

Bruce's arms were warm and perfect. They felt like Jack’s hugs and Janet’s protectiveness. Not like hoard. Like *family.*

"I promise, Tim," Bruce said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter End Notes

The way Bruce is written in fics is interesting to me, because despite his black and white morals he's canonically able to work with people who are a lot more morally gray. Some people (RIP Huntress) he's way less tolerant toward, but in general I find him to be a forgiving person (Exhibit A, JLA members who've canonically murdered people, and Exhibit B, him

giving his rogues chance after chance to seek professional help. I'm looking especially hard at you, Two-Face).

Tim in this incidence does not need forgiveness of any kind (pats the baby's head), but I know there were worries that Bruce would be angry. He is, but not at Tim. All those "Dragon 101" lessons are paying off.

TLDR Tim and Bruce really needed to have a moment. ❤️ Tune in next time for more hoard reactions, Tim getting cuddles, and, of course, the beginning of the fallout. ;)

With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies?

Chapter Summary

The Waynes start to deal with the fallout. Tim begins to realize just how bad it is.

Chapter Notes

I keep thinking "Oh, the next chapter is ready, I just need to touch up a few scenes" then end up writing an entire new chapter. I'm cursed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Head tucked into Bruce's chest and hand wrapped around Steph while she slept, all Tim wanted was to forget the world existed and focus on his hoard. But the world waited for no dragon, and as Jason slammed the door to the hospital room open, it came crashing back.

"We have to go, now," Jason said. "B, get the baby bird. I'll grab the waffle queen."

"Jason?" Bruce said.

Tim made a confused noise and lifted his head, only for Bruce to nudge it back against him with a warm hand.

"Jason, what is it?" Bruce said.

Jason glanced at the hall and slammed the door shut again. It shuddered on its hinges. "I'll tell you in a second. We need to get *gone,* the faster the better. I don't know how long my disguise is going to hold."

"You're not in disguise," Bruce said.

Jason wore a beat up Gotham Knights jacket over faded jeans and a *If you can read this it means you know how to read* T-shirt that had been a gag gift from Dick. A baseball cap, face mask, and sunglasses combo topped the look off.

"I am," Jason said, pulling the sunglasses off. "You think I'd be caught dead in a Knights shirt otherwise? The last thing we need is some asshat recognizing me as your dead kid. The news is already blowing up, we can't afford *more* attention."

"News?" Tim mumbled, words slightly slurred. Once Crystal had left to pack a bag of Steph's belongings to bring to the manor, Bruce had brought him back into the room to guard his purple human. It'd been nearly forty minutes since, and Tim's heart was sluggish with big feelings that made his eyes droopy and thoughts fuzzy.

"Yes, the news," Jason glanced at him, then back to Bruce. "He good to move? Because the sooner we're away from the public eye the better."

Tim was perfectly fine 'to move.' Half his limbs were either in bandages or casts, but he could limp like the best of them. He just didn't see why he'd have to do so now.

"He can with help," Bruce said. "Are our identities breached?"

"No, thank God," Jason sighed. He took off the baseball cap and ran sweaty hands through his hair. "The guy who heard your name didn't spill the beans before Tim spilled *him* across the floor, so we're in the clear. But we need to get the kid out of here; he's still half-shifted, and there are people looking for Robin—*either* Robin—who shouldn't see that."

"N't half," Tim said, burrowing his face back into Bruce. "Just a little."

Mostly his fingernails, along with a peppering of scales on his arms that wouldn't go away. Bruce had wrapped Tim in his extra big jacket to hide them from the nurses.

"Whatever," Jason said, marching to Steph's bedside. "We need to go home."

Jason flipped through Steph's charts, muttering under his breath. Tim kept his grip on her wrist, letting the fluttery beat of her pulse soothe him. He didn't want to move. Moving sounded awful. It was better to stay here with Bruce and Steph. It smelled gross and the medical humans were Tim's new least favorite life forms, but he was comfy and wanted to stay that way.

"I found two of the survivors. They're not an issue anymore," Jason said. "Don't give me that look, B, I'm not going to play fucking nice with kid torturers and traffickers. They were going to hunt down Tim and keep him as a pet. Kevin says Sionis was *personally interested*. We need to send a message to any of his potential buyers that *nobody* touches the Birds, and if you're fucking moral code can't handle that then—"

"You said *two,"* Bruce cut in. "Where is the last one?"

Tim made another noise as Steph's heart monitor beeped a little faster. He thumbed her pulse point carefully, making sure his sharp nails didn't nick her bruised skin.

"Fuck if I know," Jason said, voice shaking. "I'm *trying,* B, but everyone's gone to ground. You haven't seen—*shit,* the GCPD is a kicked anthill and the gangs are worse. We have to get back to the manor before the hospital gets swarmed too. There are too many eyes here."

"I'm not angry at you," Bruce said. "Jaylad, I'm—"

Steph's hand twitched, then grabbed onto Tim's and squeezed.

"Steph, Steph!" Tim lunged forward, falling onto the floor as any and all thoughts vanished from his head. "You're okay!"

Jason and Bruce stopped arguing, hovering over the bed. The heart monitor beeped irregularly as Steph slowly cracked open her eyes. One was red—burst blood vessel—and she coughed as she tried to mumble something.

"Where . . ?" she slurred, voice froggy.

Sweaty hair was stuck to her forehead, and although the nurses had wiped her down there was still the scent of Gotham basements and metal pliers lingering against her skin, but she was alive, alive, alive, and that was all that mattered to Tim.

“Gotham General,” Bruce said gently. “You just missed your mother. She’ll be back soon.”

Steph wrinkled her nose. “Ho . . . pital?”

Tim resisted the urge to hug her until she popped, but only because that could set back her recovery. He tugged her arm off the bed and against his chest, hugging that instead as he purred loudly.

“Tim, tickles…” Steph mumbled. “B-man, wha hap’ned? Why hopital?”

“We’ll discuss it later,” Bruce said. He brushed the hair out of her face. “Go back to sleep, Robin.”

“N’t the boss of me,” she grumbled. “Dumb furry . . .”

But her eyes were already fluttering shut and she fell back into the void almost instantly. Whatever drugs the hospital had her on were strong.

“Good human,” Tim whispered, nuzzling her arm with his cheek. “Get better.”

The nurses said Steph needed a lot of painkillers for a little while, just until she was ready to be awake for longer, so it was no wonder she’d been so out of it. The mass of bruises on her skin were at odds with her slack expression, but the longer she slept the quicker they would disappear, right? He’d make sure she got all the rest she needed.

“Great,” Jason said, clapping his hands. “She’s not a vegetable. Let’s go.”

“Jason,” Bruce said sternly.

“What?” Jason snapped. “As much as I want a gooey, tearful reunion, *this isn’t the place.* Next time she wakes up, she’ll hopefully behind maximum security in the manor with an emotional support butler baking her cookies. Tim too, he looks ready to collapse. Alfred is terrified out of his mind about both of them.”

“Shit,” Bruce muttered. *“Alfred.”*

“Hey, Tim, buddy” Jason said, crouching beside Steph’s bed, “mind getting up for me? We’ve got to go.”

“No,” Tim said, letting a whine enter his voice. “Moving hurts.”

Everything hurt. His arm was wrapped in an itchy cast and his leg could barely hold his weight. Dozens of minor injuries littered his skin, and his human form felt as stable as paper mache in a car wash. And that was when he was staying *still.* He was sick of being tossed in the tornado of life. Couldn’t he enjoy a few minutes of Steph-time?

Jason ran a hand over his face. “I know, injuries fucking suck. But we can take care of Steph better in your nest. Do it for her.”

That was a mean argument. Jason was being a jerk, he knew Tim couldn’t say no to that.

“There we go,” Jason said, helping Tim get to his feet. “One step at a time. B, go get us checked out. Use your billionaire powers to expedite things or something. I’ll give Alfred another call so he can bring the car around. We need to be out of here yesterday. I already saw some of Penguin’s men at the front entrance. They’re looking for eyewitnesses of Tim’s . . . playtime last night.”

“I see. If Oswald is on the move, then we can’t afford to delay,” Bruce said. “I’ll be back soon. Take care of him.”

Tim started to nod, then realized Bruce had been talking to Jason.

“No shit Sherlock,” Jason grumbled. “What do you think I’m doing?”

Jason smelled like blood and gunpowder. Stupid disguise didn't even have a decoy scent, he must have been rushed. Tim hooked his fingers into the belt loops on Jason's jeans and flopped against him, weight all on one leg as he added nausea to the list of things wrong with him. Everything smelled too strong and the lights were too bright. He wanted to turn his brain off, but it sounded like there were lots of things happening, so he should help with it. After all, it was his fault.

The door slid open and Bruce left. Tim's breath hitched as soon as he couldn't see his human anymore. Bruce, gone. But there were so many other hoard members out of sight as well. Babs, Alfie, Jack, Janet . . .

"Where's Dick?" Tim whispered, heartbeat ratcheting up. "Why isn't he back yet?"

Had something gone wrong? Was he hurt? *Dead?*

Jason grabbed a crutch off the side of the wall and nudged Tim into holding it. The doctors had said Tim would need to use it for a while while his leg healed.

"Remember how I said the city is metaphorically on fire?" Jason said. "Dick's trying to douse some of the flames. The metaphorical ones, not the actual bonfires you started. The Fire department's got a handle on that. Don't worry, he's mostly safe. Anyway, get your balance while I get Steph's gurney ready to go."

"*Mostly* safe?" Tim said, queasy.

"I meant completely. He's completely, one-hundred percent safe."

Jason's eyes were steely as he gave Steph an extra blanket and rearranged her IV. Any other day, Tim would be asking more questions, but today he couldn't manage that kind of curiosity. He was so tired, and all his energy was spend trying to stay standing, so he just did what he was told and hoped that was enough.

***

Leaving the hospital was a blur. Tim limped beside the gurney, his crutch making thumps on the tile, until Bruce scooped him up and carried him the rest of the way to the parking garage. Alfred met them in a nondescript van, but there wasn't time for a reunion before they were on the streets and headed back toward Bristol. The only thing Tim could recall was how Alfred's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. Tim idly thought the butler was who Bruce inherited his angry face from. Alfred was furious about something.

After Steph was safely bundled up in a bed upstairs, the Waynes nudged Tim to his own room to shower and get changed. Tim did so with the lethargy of a dying sea slug. Once he was done, he stood in the middle of the hallway, hair dripping onto the rug. His skin was clammy, his brain fuzzy, and he was at a loss for what to do with himself.

"Shouldn't have left her," he muttered. "Bad dragon."

Jason was guarding her, but that was no reason for Tim to go somewhere else. Except, Jason had looked like he wanted to be alone. Or, half alone, since Steph was there, just asleep, but in a quieter place. A small, dark room without shootouts or angry dragons that threw him into walls.

Tim swallowed. Jason tried to hide it, but he was favoring one side like Bruce and Dick had been earlier. Like he was hurt.

"Bad dragon," Tim whispered again. "Monster."

He stood there, staring at the wall, drowning in an ocean of feelings until Alfred found him and gently guided him to the parlor downstairs.

"There we are," Alfred said, spreading a throw blanket across Tim's legs. "Right as rain. Stay here for a moment, dear boy. It will give me peace of mind while I take care of business."

"Business?" Tim echoed.

Alfred poured him a cup of licorice tea—Tim's favorite—and had Bruce come back to wrap Tim in a hug. The butler slipped out of the room while Tim, burritoed on the couch like a lizard at the vet,

was distracted by his favorite human.

The teacup was warm. Tim liked that.

“You’ve got some color back,” Bruce said. His hair was wet. He must have showered as well. “That’s good. Doing better?”

Tim blinked slowly. If the thought of falling asleep didn’t make him want to have a panic attack, he probably already would’ve crashed.

“What’s happening outside?” Tim asked softly, ignoring the original question.

The two of them were on a two-person couch. The parlor was tucked off the main hallway, facing east. It was afternoon now. The day was slipping through Tim’s fingers. Dick still wasn’t back, and as the sun crept higher Tim’s worry climbed.

Bruce sighed. “Panic.”

The ceramic of the mug began to cool, condensation forming on the rim. A thin line of steam drifted across Tim’s face like ashless smoke in a forest fire.

“There hasn’t been a dragon in a metropolitan area since the late nineteenth century,” Bruce continued. “There is . . . concern about that. And interest.”

Interest, sure. That was one thing to call it. The last dragon to wander into human territory hadn’t left any survivors. Tim hadn’t planned to leave any either, so panic and fear made sense. His kind were categorized as an active danger to all forms of life for a reason, and the sooner people remember that, the better. Tim preferred being feared instead of . . . Whatever Black Mask had looked at him with.

Expensive, that’s what Vanni had had called him. Someone had said he was *pretty* too.

“You were caught on film,” Bruce continued, tucking a strand of Tim’s hair behind his ear. “The EMPs you used hid the massacres in the warehouses, but your flight patterns were too low to the ground and there was no cloud cover. There are several viral videos of Robin transforming, taken from everything from cellphones to CCTV.”

Tim gripped the mug tighter. “Babs can—”

“No, Tim,” Bruce said softly. “It’s too late. There have already been millions of views, and the footage was played on several news cycles.”

“But,” Tim said. Warm tea drenched his hand as the mug shook. “But Babs can do anything.”

She’d formed the Birds of Prey. She coded Arkham’s once-unbreakable algorithm. She could do things with computers that’d taken *years* for Tim to get around, and even then only barely as a one-time hack. A couple videos couldn’t stump her, could they?

Bruce gently took the mug and set it on an end table. “She can. But even if we take the videos down, we can’t uninstall memories.”

Tim wanted to argue that with a hammer and the right amount of blunt force, *anything* could be “uninstalled” from a human cranium, but that wasn’t what this was about. If that many people had seen the videos, then even Martian Manhunter and Zatanna combined wouldn’t be able to wipe the slate clean.

Vanni’s voice echoed in his ears. *It looked expensive.*

Jack was going to be worse than angry when he found out about this—he’d be *scared,* and Tim didn’t think he could handle seeing his dad like that right now.

“It’s okay, Tim,” Bruce said. “We’ll figure something out. Stay with me.”

Tim hadn’t realized he’d been making tiny, alarmed whines until Bruce’s voice got them to stop.

“Let us worry about this,” Bruce said. “The boys and I will handle everything. Your job is to focus on Steph. She needs you right now. Understand?”

Tim shook his head. “This isn’t the kind of thing that can be *handled.”*

Just when he thought the ride was over, things got worse. It was too much. His muscles *burned* with the need to move and solve his problems dragon-style. There were too many threats outside his nest, he needed to eliminate them and protect what little hoard he had left. So what if people were after him? If Tim made it so there weren’t *any* people left, it’d be fine. Easy math. Janet would be proud.

Logically, Tim knew that wouldn’t work. He was rational enough to see the flawed logic in that plan, but it was *something* other than sitting here panicking, and that alone made it alluring. His instincts promised a way to fix what was broken, even though his human side could tell they were long past that point. Pandora’s box was open, and even Hope would have taken a hard pass at sticking around.

“Let me be the judge of that,” Bruce said. “I’m Batman, remember? Nothing bad is going to happen to you or Steph. We’ll make sure of it.”

We.

Because Tim wasn’t alone. He had a hoard of humans who loved him. They had always been there for him, and even when he thought he didn’t need their help, they’d given it to him; Babs, helping hide the Joker’s death. Dick and Jason, scrambling to help him make friends. Cass, teaching him to dance and run silently across rooftops. Alfred, patiently adding each of Tim’s recipes to the family collection despite their ‘atrocious nature.’ Steph, always determined to be his shining knight as she flew from building to building beside him. And Bruce—Bruce was always there, squeezing Tim in the tightest hugs and loving him no matter how difficult Tim became even when it would be easier to leave.

“Promise?” Tim whispered.

The Waynes weren’t just hoard anymore. They were family, and family helped each other. Bruce had to be telling the truth, but Tim still needed to hear him say it, because the world was tossing

him in a tempest and right now his humans were some of the only things that felt real.

“Always,” Bruce said fiercely.

But as he spoke, a careful knock echoed off the door.

“Sir,” Alfred said coolly, “I’m afraid you have a guest who wishes to speak with you on an urgent matter.”

Jim Gordon stood in the doorway, looking like death warmed over. He had a face of flint, and the grimness in his gaze made Tim press closer against B. It reminded him of Leslie, how she had looked at Bruce back in the clinic with blame in her eyes and a bone to pick. But Tim didn’t need to be scared of Gordon. He was a good human. A friend.

But then again, Leslie had been too.

“Batman,” Gordon said, stepping into the room. “We need to talk about your bird.”

On his belt, a pair of handcuffs gleamed.

Chapter End Notes

Tim's Memory-Erasing Technique in Action

Meanwhile, somewhere in Canada:
Janet *calmly picking her teeth*
Jack:
Jack to his college buddies: So, the good news, you don't need to worry about that home invader anymore. The bad news, you might need a new carpet because bloodstains are hard to get out.
Lily:
Greg:
Greg *calmly*: Jack. Your wife ate a robber in front of us. I don't care about the carpet. I care about answers.

Lily: She's--she's a--?
Jack: ...I MAY have left a few parts out about my and Janet's meetcute back in the day.

All this to say, no Jack has not checked the news today. He is a tad preoccupied. ;)

Faultlines

Chapter Summary

Gordon has some things to say.

Chapter Notes

NGL this chapter was the devil to write and an eon to complete. TLDR I am working three jobs and have very little free time. The cherry on top? I also went back and forth on this chapter several times as I decided how I wanted events to go. Ultimately, I went with my original tone, which was decided before I'd fleshed out a lot of the previous chapters. I don't think I'll ever be completely happy with this chapter, but A) it's complete and B) it accomplishes what I originally wanted to, so I'm releasing it to the wilds.

You guys are awesome. I live for your comments and they've been a special delight over the last month as I've been extremely stressed. I always look forward to opening Ao3 and seeing people's thoughts, theories and reactions. It's the highlight of my day. ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room was at a standstill, Gordon on one side while Bruce and Tim were on the other. Alfred moved to say something, then sharply turned his head and walked down the hall. Gordon continued to glare at Bruce.

It had been a long day. Tim was running on no sleep, multiple injuries, and the emotional whiplash of a cat-o-nine-tails. Gordon's arrival was the cherry on top of a fiery day from hell, and Tim went through a checklist of every feeling in the dictionary before his brain cataloged the important facts.

Cop.

Handcuffs.

It didn't take a genius to figure out where this was going.

"Jim," Bruce said, keeping a firm arm around Tim, "now isn't a good time."

"You're going to have to make it one," Gordon said, looking like he'd fought a wildfire and lost. The smell of ash and burned flesh clung to him like a second coat, and his displeasure was as thick as smoke. "God dammit, Bruce, the city's in an uproar. Do you have any how this looks?"

Tim's eyes flitted back to Gordon's handcuffs. They were something Tim could get out of easily, but that wasn't the point. Gordon wasn't hoard; he was just some guy, and like Leslie he'd spent the

last year telling Bruce how much he disliked the Robins being on the streets. Leslie hadn't had weapons, but she'd still almost taken Steph away. Now, Gordon was here, mad and grumpy.

Tim curled his fingers into Bruce's shirt so hard the fabric started to tear. He took back everything he'd ever said about Jack's "silly" paranoia. All those fears of discovery were totally valid and unfortunately relevant.

"I have eyes," Bruce said, patting Tim's head in a soothing motion. "But it's nothing we can't handle."

Gordon scoffed, wiping black ash off his face. "I have everyone from conservation groups to Safari hunters demanding I do something about the forty-foot murder machine that just tore apart an entire warehouse and burned down three more. The entire world is watching Gotham now. There's no salvaging this without another five incidents, Bruce."

"Twenty feet," Tim mumbled. "M' tail doesn't count."

If it did, he and Janet would easily measure twice what their bodies actually were. People needed to get better at reptile measurements.

"Not important," Gordon said, still focused on the Bat. "For the love of all that's holy, Bruce, you'd think after nearly twenty years of me dealing with the hell you put me through you'd at least given me a heads up that your boy was a monster that can liquefy flesh."

"Don't call him that," Bruce said. "It was a need to know basis."

"I damn well need to know now, don't I?" Gordon said. "Your little Robin murdered a building full of people and set three more on fire. He's a danger to himself and others. I can't let this stand."

Tim tucked his head into Bruce's shoulder, clinging tighter. What did Gordon mean by that? Did he want to arrest Tim? Put him in jail? In Arkham?

Tim tensed in his human's arms. Arkham was a bad place; thick walls, no space, and full of bad people who'd probably want to keep him as a pet. Arkham was a place for monsters.

Bruce actually growled. "Why are you here?"

Gordon opened his mouth, but got cut off by someone careening around the corner and slamming into the door frame.

"Y-You," Dick gasped, leaning heavily on the wood as he pointed an accusing finger at Gordon. "bastard."

Bats didn't kill, but Dick looked like he was ready to. His shirt was untucked, he was streaked with so much ash there was a trail on the floor behind him, and his hair was a wave of caked on rubble.

"Richard," Gordon said. "Why aren't you at your station?"

Dick pointed at Gordon with both hands as if his fingers could shoot lightning. "This trumps my day job, asshole. You sent me all the way to New Gotham on a red herring, and now you're in my family's house trying to arrest the resident scaly boy. This isn't just uncalled for—it's a dick move!"

“Uncalled for? You were lighting the remaining crime scenes on fire,” Gordon snarled. “We’ll be lucky to have any forensic evidence now.”

“Family duty and arson duty have an overlap, I don’t need to defend myself,” Dick said, pushing off the door frame to stand between Gordon and the couch. “You, on the other hand, need to get out of my house while we recalibrate. I know the footage looks bad, but we can handle—”

Tim reached forward to try and grab the hem of Dick’s shirt, just to prove he was really there, but he was too far away.

“Looks bad?” Gordon said. “I have over a dozen dismembered corpses cremated in Dutch Oven statement pieces scattered across the city! This level of brutality—”

“Is completely normal for his species,” Dick said, just as angrily. “The fact he hasn’t done this before is actually great! Tim is a victim here. For God’s sake, Jim, he’s still a baby.”

“I’m not a—” Tim began, but Bruce put a hand over his mouth.

“You have no idea how hard he was pushed before snapping. If you want to blame someone, place the thrice-damned ‘pacifist’ in Crime Alley who triggered his psychotic breakdown,” Dick said. “You can take your self-righteous morality crusade and shove it up your—”

“He wiped out the main players of a major gang, Richard!” Gordon yelled. “The last time this happened, I had a duffel bag of severed heads left on the station’s doorstep and a possible war brewing on the streets. That was controlled manslaughter, this was just sadistic.”

No, no that wasn’t right, was it? Tim bit his lip, recalling all the biting and tearing and burning and hurting he’d done. It was a blur. He remembered but couldn’t touch the specifics, like the memories were showcased behind blurry glass.

“They hurt Spoy,” Tim said, peeking up at the commissioner. “They deserved it.”

Gordon made eye contact with Tim and faltered. Tim could only imagine what he looked like, collapsed against Bruce with red eyes, a arm in a cast from the bullet he’d taken, and a thousand cuts and minor burns on his skin. Pathetic, probably. Weak.

“Nobody deserves that, kid,” Gordon said, losing some of his fire. “We can’t even identify everyone.”

Tim thought of Steph lying still, blood dripping from her chest onto the asphalt no matter how hard he tried to keep it inside her. His first real friend, her spark almost snuffed, and Black Mask had laughed.

“But . . .” Tim said again, unsure how else to put it. Losing control had terrified him, but his hoard had been hurt. “But it was Spoy.”

Gordon’s lips thinned. “Would you do it again?”

Tim stared, wide-eyed and unsure how to answer. He would. For her. But Gordon probably wouldn’t like that answer.

“Jim,” Dick said tersely, “stop it. You know as well as I do that this was out of his control.”

“Do I?” Gordon whirled back to Dick. “All I’ve got is years of police reports of him escalating violence on common crooks. He’s taken bites out of people, Grayson. This is just an escalation of that.”

Dick muttered something that sounded suspicious like ‘teething phase’ that Tim, even in his miserable state, was offended by.

“Local lunatics and gang lords are bad enough,” Gordon continued. “I’m not letting a murderous whatever-that-is go on killing sprees in my city too. I’ve worked with you Bats this long because you’ve helped keep Gotham safe. Letting a dragon immolate warehouses because they’re upset is the opposite of that.”

“Let?” Bruce said.

“Screw you, commish. Tim does not belong in police custody,” Dick said, fists balled.

“You aren’t taking him anywhere,” Bruce added. He sounded like Janet when she was truly angry. Tim couldn’t help but adore that, even as his heart beat a thousand miles per second.

Gordon released a long, deep breath. “So, what, I’m supposed to let this slide? Pray he doesn’t snap and burn down half the city again? The law isn’t yours to play with, Batman. I’ve overlooked your tango with legalities for years, but I have my lines. If every sob story was an excuse for mass murder, we wouldn’t even bother with city lawyers. I don’t want the little guy behind bars, but my duty is to protect Gotham. If he’s liable to fly off the handle like this, something needs to be done.”

“We’re looking after Tim,” Bruce said. “He’s not your concern.”

“He is,” Gordon said. “If he’s not listening to you, who’s to say his next victims will be mobsters? Even mobsters should receive due process, not decapitation and melted bones. Either you call up your Justice League friends and get them to intervene, or I bring him in on charges of mass murder.”

He pinned Tim with a firm look. “Tim Drake, not Robin.”

Dick swore. “Now hold on—”

“No,” Gordon said. “This is my line. You folks may believe in prisoner reform for anyone and anything, but I’m not letting an active threat to Gotham get a pass because they were upset when it happened. It’s bad enough the Red Hood hasn’t been caught, I’m not letting the bats turn to a darker form of justice just to protect their own.”

The Red Hood was currently upstairs reading Little Women to an unconscious Spoiler.

“You don’t want to do this, Jim,” Bruce said. “If you bring in Tim, you expose all of us.”

Gordon pursed his lips. “Then don’t make me, Batman. Get your Super friends involved, release your dragon back into the wild, do something. If you don’t, I will, because this was bad and I will not let it happen again.”

Noise filled Tim’s ears. He had contingencies for leaving Gotham, Bats in tow, to live in the wilderness somewhere. It’d be easy to shift out of his human skin and not look back, making all

these problems go away. If this had happened a year ago, he could have relocated his hoard without a hitch.

But he couldn't do that now. Jack was still in physical therapy in Canada, Steph needed looking after, and worst of all—Tim was attached. He loved Gotham. It was his territory. He'd staked the claim himself and defended it on his own for over a year. His roots went deep and he never wanted to leave.

But killing those humans meant he might have to. Jack and Janet might need to go into hiding as well. He'd ruined everything.

"Shh, Tim, it's okay," Bruce said, running a hand through Tim's hair. "Breathe."

Tim sucked in air. He hadn't realized he'd started to hyperventilate. Stupid emotions.

"Compromising our identities will put all of Gotham in danger," Bruce said to Gordon. "The GCPD isn't equipped to locate rogue attacks before they're enacted, nor respond to gang violence as quickly as us. You'll do more harm to the city by bringing us in."

Gordon shook his head. "I've seen what happens when vigilantes go down the slippery moral slope. Even after the second Robin died, you didn't excuse this level of violence. I'm not sitting idly by while you let it keep happening. That's a short stop to being judge, jury, and executioner of Gotham. You'd be no different from any other psycho freak vying for power."

Bruce and Dick bristled. Tim could sense the argument about to worsen. Hours or shouting, threats, and negotiation, all veneered with morality and self-righteousness.

"A shame, then," Alfred's voice said, cutting through the silence like a knife. "I believe you will be severely disappointed at the turn this conversation will soon be taking, sir."

Alfred stood in the threshold of the room, as unflappable as ever. His eyes had a steely quality that Tim only saw when his charges were threatened. The last time Alfred had looked like that, he'd tried to shoot Janet.

"Mr. Pennyworth," Gordon said. "I should've known you'd object to due process of law."

"I have always been a rebel," Alfred said coolly. "However, I was not referring to myself. Miss Gordon is here to speak with you. Now, if you will excuse me."

He stepped aside and exited the room, leaving the door open behind him. Babs rolled into the parlor when the opening was clear.

"Barbara?" Gordon said, bewildered. "What are you doing here?"

Babs stopped at the edge of the rug. "I came as soon as I realized what you were doing, Dad."

Her hair was thrown into a messy bun, her face was red, and she was dressed in pressed slacks and a thick turtleneck. Her ID badge was still on her neck. She must have rushed over from the library.

"Babs," Gordon said, "what do you think I'm doing?"

"I think you've been up fifty-nine hours straight dealing with back-to-back serial killer cases before this happened, and now you're overreacting by trying to arrest an emotionally compromised

teenage boy," Babs said. "And by doing so, robbing the city of its best vigilantes."

Gordon took a step back, looking at Babs in horror. "You know that they're—?" He whirled on Dick. "You told her?!"

Dick's hands jerked in aborted movements. He looked from Tim to Babs, as if unsure who to play human shield for.

"I've known for years, Dad," Babs said. "Dick didn't have to tell me anything."

If Gordon had any color left in his hair, this conversation would've been where he lost it. Tim watched the commissioner go through the five stages of grief, for once at a loss of words.

"You take a step closer to Tim and I'm crashing the entire GCPD network," Babs said. "You oust the Bats' identities and I'll personally make sure the only digital database left in this city is my own. You do anything to take Tim away from his hoard and I guarantee an unstable teenage dragon is the least you'll have to worry about."

She gripped the armrests of her chair so hard her knuckles creaked, and her glare reminded Tim of when she'd graced Gotham's streets as one of its most competent crime fighters.

"You knew this whole time," Gordon said, staring at her like he didn't know her. "How?"

"I'm the daughter of a detective," Babs said. "It wasn't hard."

Gordon swallowed. "You can't cripple the police force, Barbara. You're good with computers, but even you can't manage that."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll manage just fine." Babs pulled out her wrist computer and pressed a button. Every screen, including the TV on the wall, lit up with acid green, the Oracle symbol on full display.

Watching Gordon put the pieces together was like watching heartbreak in real time. Tim saw years of lies suddenly slot into place, followed by betrayal and anger. The sickly hue of Oracle's screens cast a Lazarus-like glow onto Gordon's face.

"Sweet mother of . . ." Gordon whispered, the glare of the screens reflected in his glasses. "And you would use all this against me?"

"I promised myself that I'd look after Tim, no matter what," Babs said. "I'm going to keep my word, Dad, even if it puts me in your crossfire. You've got your lines, I've got mine."

Her eyes flickered to Tim, and he remembered, suddenly, another conversation surrounded by Oracle's code, trying to explain why he'd killed the Joker and ending the night curled in her arms, breathing in the scent of her shampoo.

Babs turned back to her father, face steely.

"You can either walk out without making your arrest, or lose Gotham's best crime fighters, compromise the police's digital infrastructure, and make an enemy out of me." Babs said. "I assure you, that's much worse than getting on Bruce's bad side."

"You can't be serious, Barbara." Gordon took a step forward, fists balled.

Oracle was whispers in a dark room, hidden and tucked away so well it took skill and effort to know she was there. Arkham's security code was one of the few projects Babs had taken credit for, but it was effective enough that it was a warning in of itself. Being on Oracle's list was something everybody tried to avoid.

Dick planted himself in front of Babs, jaw clenched and shoulders squared.

"Richard," Gordon said warningly.

"Babs said her piece," Dick said. "Maybe for once, you should listen."

His engagement ring shone on his hand.

Gordon looked between Dick's tense, combative stance, Bruce's gritted teeth, Babs' fingers hovering over a kill-switch, and Tim's tear-streaked face.

"Fine," The commissioner said, "but this conversation isn't over."

He stalked out of the room, trench coat billowing behind him.

The room was silent after he left, the air thicker than ice.

A moment later, Alfred appeared in the doorway. "Mister Gordon has left, sir. I saw him out myself. Excellent work, all of you. I didn't even require my shotgun."

The Waynes breathed heavy sighs. Babs slumped in her seat, rubbing her temples.

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce said. "You as well, Babs."

"I'm sorry I was so late getting here," she said. "I didn't know he was coming until the last second. His tracker pinged the proximity alert once he was within a couple miles of the manor. I'll need to increase the radius."

Tim wanted to ask why Babs had an alarm for Gordon visiting the manor, but he was having too much trouble stringing is thoughts together to ask why.

"You were so hot, pulling up your code like that," Dick said, giving her a shaky smile. "I'm really marrying up."

Babs' lips quirked in a smile. "If it helps, I've practiced that move a lot. Hard to look intimidating when you can't extend your screen properly."

Bruce looked wry and Dick chuckled, relaxing further. Tim wished he could feel the same, but he was on an emotional delay today, and the aftereffects of the conversation were still hitting him.

"You guys did all that for me?" He said weakly.

"Of course, Tim," Bruce said.

"But—" Tim didn't know where to start. He flexed his hands open and closed. "But I lost control. I'm dangerous."

Tim had sixteen years of repressing his instincts behind him, and that should have counted for something. He'd thought he could trust himself to keep his cool. How could the Waynes stand to look at him now that they knew he couldn't?

Dick knelt by the couch. "I'm pretty sure you've already gotten the spiel, Timmy, but we love you. And this isn't your fault. Okay? We're not blaming you for anything. The letter of the law is the least important part of what we do. It's about the people. It's always been about the people."

"But I hurt all those people," Tim said in a small voice. "And all those secrets—all the promises I was supposed to keep—those mattered."

"Yes," Bruce said. "They did."

Tim flinched.

"What my boy means to say," Alfred said, refilling Tim's teacup. "Is that many things can matter at the same time. That does not mean we choose one above the other. Is that not so, master Bruce?"

A rumbly grunt was the only reply, followed by a large, calloused hand curling around Tim's shoulder, keeping him sheltered like a bird in a storm.

Babs wheeled closer. "My dad will calm down. Maybe not quickly, but after a few night's sleep he'll realize he was an ass today. Don't take what he said to heart, Tim. This isn't the first time he's flown off the handle at Bruce."

"Though it is the first he's behaved so abysmally in front of one of the Robins," Alfred muttered. "Deplorable."

"Yes, it is, which is why I'll be giving him the third degree for the next few months," Babs said, crossing her arms. "It'll be easier now that I can blatantly troll his Internet usage to get the point across. It makes giving up the engagement charade almost worth it. Dick and I will have to get married out of spite now."

"Yeah," Dick said. "So much spite."

They high-fived.

Tim still didn't laugh. No matter how chipper they were, it still seemed like everybody were standing in a crater after a nuclear bomb went off. Something ached in his heart, but it wasn't just sadness. Too poky and sharp for that. It felt red and orange and raw. Tim shoved it down.

"What now?" He said.

Bruce sighed. "Now we get you to bed, and while you rest we'll come up with a plan. All you need to worry about right now is getting better."

Sleep? He'd rather break his other arm.

"I can help. I'm the one who—" Tim began.

"Hey, none of that," Dick said. "What did I just tell you?"

Tim clicked his jaw shut and glared, mulish yet touched.

“Come on, champ, let’s get you upstairs,” Bruce said. “It’s been a long day.”

Even with all the affirmations, he still couldn’t quite fathom that he could mess up—truly, irrevocably go against everything Bruce stood for—and still be looked at like he was precious. But Bruce had promised, and Dick and Babs were insisting the same thing, and Tim wanted to believe them.

It really, really had, and Tim was ready for it to end, but not just yet.

Instead of standing, he fell against Babs and tucked himself against her. Her chair almost tipped over, but instead of complaining she grabbed and held him close.

“Just give me a minute,” Tim mumbled into her hair. “Please.”

He wanted to hold and be held. Once he slept, tomorrow would arrive. He wasn’t ready for it, but time wasn’t real right now. He could just be.

“Take as long as you need,” Babs said, warm and sweet and real.

She smelled like apple shampoo, electronics, the scent of library books. Home.

Even with all the worry and hurt bubbling inside him, at this moment all Tim felt was . . . Safe.

Chapter End Notes

Not the best look for Gordon. I want it on the record that I do like him as a character and wish I could have foreshadowed this chapter better. I blame Part 4's insane word count making it impossible for me to emphasize everything. The dangers of writing a super-long series piece by piece, I suppose. (At some point, I may go back and edit Gordon's previous scenes to make this a little more obvious, but the problem is mostly that you don't see him on-screen for a hot minute.)

For context, he really wouldn't act like this normally. It's Gordon temper + compounding stress + sleep deprivation = a massive crashout and poor decision making. He will be in the doghouse for a while, but the Bats can work with him on this (after making him rue being born for a bit). Leslie on the other hand . . . Well, you'll see what happens to her next chapter. ;)

Works inspired by this one

family blues (AKA when your wife and son conspire against each other but team up against you) by pinkmagnolias

here there be (baby) dragons by deitybird

Cowboy Bart fanart for "Happy Families Kill People Too" by lorepigeon

Tim is a weirdo, but he's our weird- Jason, what do you mean you have a child!? by WhiteRider

Of Tiny Dragonlings and Their Fatherly Bat by Crow_Aeris

In Triplicate by foxgloveingloves

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!